

TRAVEL MAGAZINE OF THE YEAR

A Times of India publication

lonely planet

MAGAZINE
INDIA

₹ 150
October 2015

Win!
A TRIP TO
INDONESIA
WORTH
₹ 2 Lakh



The Winter List

Our definitive guide to where
you should soak up the sun
(and snow) this season

VINTAGE KENYA

Hop aboard the Lunatic Express
and revisit the romance of early
exploration in this untamed land

Plus

FAIRYTALE

SWITZERLAND

BURN DOWN THE HOUSE IN

JAPAN

SNOWY

SIKKIM

PICK YOUR FAVE

INDIAN OCEAN ISLANDS



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We aim to provide you with options that cover a range of budgets and we reveal the positive and negative of all locations we visit.

Because we believe it is important that our journalists experience first-hand what they're writing about and because you require comprehensive information from every corner of the world, at times it may be necessary for us to seek assistance from travel providers such as tourist boards, airlines, hotels, national parks, etc. However, when receiving such assistance, we ensure our editorial integrity and independence are not compromised through the following measures:

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- by never promising to offer anything in return, such as positive coverage.

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This Month's Cover



A trip through Kenya is not just about the wildlife. Make like the old-school explorers and soak in the culture. Pictured is a Masai woman of Tipilit Village near Amboseli National Park, at her wedding ceremony.

PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES



Not everyone wants to travel

There won't really be an Editor's Note this month. Just, please, don't forget Aylan and all the others – in Syria, in Assam, in Kashmir, in Myanmar, in Sudan – who have been forced to leave everything behind. Remember that getting to choose where we go is a privilege, and remember to spare a thought for the people you meet when you go somewhere, because you don't know where they came from, or how.

And make sure the world doesn't forget, either. Keep talking about Aylan.

Vardhan Kondvikar, Editor

Follow me on Twitter & Instagram: @vardhan_lpmag

#refugees

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Please recycle when done
with the magazine

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KEY TO THIS MAGAZINE

Here's a quick guide to the sections and elements in our magazine, so you can max out your travel experience – and a menu of what's new in LPMI 2.0



Globetrotter

The jam-packed Globetrotter section brings you closer to the world through photo features, cutaways, interviews with travel buffs, food and other tidbits, and also offers sage travel advice in the form of Q&As and news on deals and upcoming festivals. **Pg 27**



The Photo Story

You can't really get much clearer than that name – a photographic journey that explores an interesting facet of a destination – architecture, wildlife, the great outdoors, food and drink... they all find their space here! **Pg 28**



Arrivals

From fun events and festivals around which you can plan your trips, to cool offers from across the globe and handy apps to make your trips simpler, if it's happening in the world of travel, you'll find it here. **Pg 40**



Postcards

This is your section entirely: we invite you, our readers, to send in photographs of special moments on your travels, little events or vistas that struck a chord or made you laugh. Tell us what you were doing there, and how this photograph came to be. Best of all, you don't need to be a professional photographer to be featured here. **Pg 10**



Easy Trips

'Easy' is the operative word here. These trips are extremely simple to plan and head out on at short notice. Typically weekend trips from the larger cities in India, all our destinations are easily accessible. We also have a 'Go Now' badge: these trips are generally seasonal, and often linked to upcoming festivals or events. **Pg 46**



Features

These are our longer, more elaborate stories, which get under the skin of a place. Each feature has a Make It Happen section; a practical guide with all the information you need to plan out this trip. This includes, where possible, the ideal, step-by-step itinerary to best enjoy a destination: take it to your agent, and off you go! **Pg 65**



Mini Guides

A hugely practical set of guides to cities or regions for you to tear out, fold and keep in your bag. Each Mini Guide contains a detailed map, hotel and restaurant listings, a slice of things to do and see, plus other useful info (Indian embassies abroad, currency, vegetarian-friendly restaurants, etc). **Pg 131**

KEY TO THIS MAGAZINE



Location:
Offers access to
the relevant map

EASYTRIPS BHORAMDEO, KAWARDHA, CHHATTISGARH



FACT SHEET

GETTING THERE

Closest metro: Kolkata (948km via NH 6)

Closest city: Raipur (133km)

Closest airport: Raipur International Airport

(150km). Indigo flies non-stop from Kolkata and

New Delhi to Raipur (return fares from ₹ 6,225).

Jet Airways and Air India fly non-stop from

Mumbai (return from ₹ 6,800). Bharamdeo

is a three-hour drive away. AC cabs charge

from ₹ 4,000 for a transfer to Bharamdeo Jungle

Retreat. The resort can also arrange for a transfer.

Closest railhead: Raipur Junction (R; 133km).

Take the daily 12810 Howrah Mumbai Mail

(leaves Howrah Junction [HWH] 8.15pm, arrives

R 9am; ₹ 1,165 Third AC), and return by the

12809 Howrah Mail (leaves R 4.15pm,

arrives HWH 5.50am, ₹ 1,165 Third AC).

GETTING AROUND

Since local transport is virtually non-existent,

it's best to have a car at your disposal. Bharamdeo

Jungle Retreat can arrange one for you starting

from ₹ 3,000 per day for an AC Innova.



WHERE TO STAY

Bharamdeo Jungle Retreat:

This earthy mud-and-wood retreat

is the personification of tranquillity.

The ever-smiling proprietor, Sunny,

is quick-witted, enjoying a great

rapport with the locals, and can offer

an unmatched glimpse into their lives

(00-91-9425558230; www.bharamdeo

jungleretreat.com, sunnybjr@rediffmail.com;

PO Village Chaura; from ₹ 7,000 with

all meals and activities like bird-watching,

trekking, cycling, visit to tribal village

and market, tribal folk dance and music).



WHERE TO EAT

Bharamdeo Jungle Retreat's

resident cook, Narayan, whips up some

delicious fare. It's usually a vegetarian

spread for lunch and non-vegetarian

for dinner. If you're a meat fanatic,

you can ask for non-vegetarian for lunch

as well, but you'll need to inform them

in advance. *Mahua*, the local moonshine,

though, can be procured at much

shorter notice.



CLEAN LOO GUIDE

Although the roads are

surprisingly well maintained,

you won't find a clean loo, or even

a decent restaurant for that

matter, all the way up

to Kawardha.

Keep a tissue

roll and

sanitiser handy.



WHAT TO PACK

Nights in

Bharamdeo

get surprisingly

chilly, so

make sure you

pack enough

woollens. A sturdy

pair of hiking shoes is also recommended

for hikes in the forest.

Above: Food at the

retreat is simple

home-cooked fare,

but delicious

Below: The locals

are a happy,

friendly lot



pair of hiking shoes is also recommended

for hikes in the forest.



SHOPPING

Sarafa Lane in Kawardha,

18km away, is lined with shops selling

some really pretty silver jewellery,

the kind you will see most tribal women

wearing. The inscriptions on some

of them, reminiscent of an Arabic script,

make them great mantelpiece items.



MEDICAL AID

Bharamdeo Jungle Retreat

has a first aid kit, but, for emergencies,

visit **Sai Sanjivani Hospital**

(00-91-7741299200; Sarodha

Lalpur Rd, Kawardha).



SAFETY

Even though it isn't teeming with wildlife,

Bharamdeo is still a wildlife sanctuary,

so chance encounters cannot be ruled out.

Avoid venturing out on foot after dark.



CHILD-FRIENDLINESS

This isn't a child-centric destination,

and kids might not savour the experience.



GOOD TO KNOW

* Alcohol is big in these parts and

the local brews, be they *mahua*, *sulfi*,

or *landa*, are absolutely delicious

(about ₹ 100/ bottle). And although

you can be sure you won't get

an adulterated lot, hygiene is still

highly suspect.

MAP: PANKAJAN PATEL



Websites:
Indicates that websites
on that page are active



Watch out for more interactivity in the magazine

Whether you've got a travel question or want to show off your stunning photos or insider knowledge of a destination, get in touch at lpmagazine@wmm.co.in.



Off the beaten Path

Bhoramdeo, Kawardha, Chhattisgarh

SUNNY DAYS

You've probably never heard of this place. In fact, chances are that you don't know much about Chhattisgarh, the state it's located in, either. So why should you be considering this unknown little destination for your next break? Because the reasons to visit are aplenty – the **Bhoramdeo Temple**, also known as the Khajuraho of Chhattisgarh, with its lotus-filled *pushpa sarovar* (lake), for one, makes a persuasive argument. Sure, if you've visited the real thing, you'll find that sobriquet a bit of a stretch, but the 11th-century architecture with its erotic imagery is undoubtedly reminiscent of what you'll see at the original.

Leisurely walks through the sal forests of the surrounding *Kakul* hills is another. But perhaps the most compelling reason is the opportunity to get a close peek into the lives of the charming tribals of Chhattisgarh. The perfect base from which to explore all this is the **Bhoramdeo Jungle Retreat** (133km from Raipur; see *Where to Stay*), a delightful little place oozing rustic appeal. Don't let the name fool you though. In spite of being designated a wildlife sanctuary, wildlife shouldn't really be at the top of your agenda here. Instead, spending a day or two in the wood-and-mud cottages, each with a nice little verandah, and chatting

A leisurely walk through sal forests is the best way to start your day

with Satyendra Upadhyay, aka Sunny, the ebullient owner of this place, should be on your agenda. The land and its produce are revered here, as they are across the state, so the traditional greeting *thali* is adorned with an assortment of fruits and veggies, rather than the usual paraphernalia. While basic comforts are in place at the resort, don't expect to catch up on your daily soap, or browse the internet, or use your phone, for that matter. So, like it or not, you'll have left the madding city far behind. Sunny was born and raised in these parts, and he has a good rapport with the locals, which is great, because the usually reticent tribals are more than willing to pose for pictures and even throw their



GREAT FROM
Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai, Nagpur, Raipur

GREAT FOR
Meeting some of the oldest tribes in India

GO NOW
To see the land painted green

homes open to his guests. Take a peek into their lives with a visit to a local market, or *haat*. Every village has a designated day of the week to play host, so that day is like a mini festival. Apart from the mindboggling variety of wares on sale, the markets are

a non-intrusive way of observing these fascinating people. Though the one at **Taregum** (every *fril*) comes recommended, it's 42km away, and not really that much different from the one near Bhoramdeo. **Thouspuri**, a small hamlet on the way to Chilpi, is also worth a visit, especially if you get to see Bakhu Baiga, the village shaman, practise his craft. Baiga denotes which tribe he's from. This part of the state is mostly inhabited by the Baigas, distinguished by the tattoos on their face. But the one thing that is common to all the tribals across the state – be it Gond, Baiga or Bhatras – is the innocence in their eyes. While utterly endearing, it isn't the ideal quality to have if you're looking

1. The cottages at the Bhoramdeo Jungle Retreat are built from wood and mud
2. The morning mist adds to the charm of the *pushpa sarovar*
3. The tribals of Chhattisgarh are possibly its greatest treasure
4. *Dhokra* tribal art figurines are a collector's delight
5. The Bhoramdeo Temple with *Khajuraho*-esque carvings

to get ahead in the world. For his part, Sunny does what he can to better their lot. So, whenever he takes his guests over to see a traditional dance, he makes sure they are remunerated in kind like buying new outfits for their ensemble, a new set of vessels for social gatherings, or even aiding with the down payment for an LCV. This is one opportunity you should make the most of. With the winds of change sweeping across the land, it won't be long before 'progress' comes a knocking, and this innocent, eminently sustainable way of life is lost forever.

WORDS ANJUMAN DEODHAR
PHOTOGRAPHS VINODHA NATHAN

TURN OVER FOR ALL YOU NEED TO GET THERE



Video: Offers access to the embedded video or audio file

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Your Reviews

We'd love to, but we can't travel everywhere, so we want **YOU** to be part of the *Lonely Planet Magazine India* team. We invite you to send in your reviews and suggestions



GULMARG, KASHMIR
Snowy stories

Mumbai-based Saloni Lanjeekar recommends a gondola ride in Kashmir

What worked: Located about 56km from Srinagar, Gulmarg is a popular ski destination. The cable car, also known as a gondola, has two phases. The first phase is at about 10,000ft above sea level, while the second is about 14,000ft above sea level. The nine- to 12-minute ride offers panoramic views of the Himalayas. There are lots of snow activities, like skiing and sledding, to enjoy here too.

What didn't: The queues for the gondola ride are very long (you have to wait at least half an hour). In winter, you have to rent fur coats and gum boots. Also, the gondola tends to stop in the middle for a few minutes, as there is a load-shedding problem here and, in Phase II, you can really feel the lack of oxygen.

MAKE IT HAPPEN: Winters in Gulmarg tend to be very cold. The best time to visit is from March to June – even though it's summer, this destination enjoys snow all year round. You can book the gondola ride online (www.gulmarggondola.com).



MUNNAR, KERALA
Head in the clouds

Asmi Vijay Shah from Mumbai recommends a visit to Munnar and Kumarakom in Kerala

What worked: Going by the number of picturesque locations you see while travelling through the state, the title 'God's Own Country' seems fitting. I particularly enjoyed my stay at Coconut Lagoon in Kumarakom. Built on the banks of Vembanad Lake, it's truly a great experience being close to nature and eating healthy, delicious food. I also loved Mountain Club in Munnar, surrounded by beautiful tea gardens. The hotel has an infinity pool, too. We woke up to views of sun-kissed mountains every morning. With the lack of Internet connectivity, you can completely disconnect from the fast pace of city life – such a fantastic getaway.

What didn't: There's some amount of walking involved on the steep slopes at Mountain Club, so it might not be convenient for the elderly.

MAKE IT HAPPEN: Coconut Lagoon: reservations: 00-91-484-301171; www.gzhearth.com/coconut-lagoon; contact@gzhearthhotels.com; Kumarakom, Kottayam Mountain Club: 91-4868-249978/9; www.mountainclub.co.in; info@mountainclub.co.in; Chinnakanal, Munnar

This page belongs To YOU
WE'RE TAKING YOUR REVIEWS IN TWO CATEGORIES

1) A 150-word review of a city, region, hotel, restaurant or activity. These have to be open to the general public – you can't put something in that your father-in-law, the Director-General of Somethingorother, arranged by pulling some strings. If it's a hotel, restaurant or activity, we need contact details and prices. And it has to be in two parts. One: what worked for you. Two: what didn't. Don't be shy here, express yourself.

At the end of each review, please mention phone details, website address, postal address and relevant rates of the place featured.

2) A one-line suggestion to other readers to go somewhere, see something or do something.

Rules

1) In the interests of verification, we need your full name, address, photograph and contact details (your personal as well as official ones), which we might check up on! Only entries with full details will be considered.

2) We will entertain only serious, factual reviews: this is not the place to plug your brother's swanky new resort, or rant about the horrible holiday you had last summer.

PLEASE SEND US PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE PLACES YOU REVIEW OR SUGGEST

Mail in your reviews and suggestions to lpmagazine@wmm.co.in



Email: Invites you to submit your Postcards, letters and reviews

Postcards

WHERE YOU'VE BEEN AND WHAT YOU'VE SEEN





Ghent started out as a settlement at the confluence of the rivers Scheldt and Leie

GHENT, BELGIUM

Silent night

It was a cold winter night in December, and I had only 20 minutes to explore Ghent on my way to Brussels. I was walking about when I noticed these three women walking along a bridge lit up by street lamps. The snow, coupled with the lights, made the scene magical and inspired me to take this photograph.



Bangalore-based IT professional **Sandip Bose** pursues photography as a hobby.

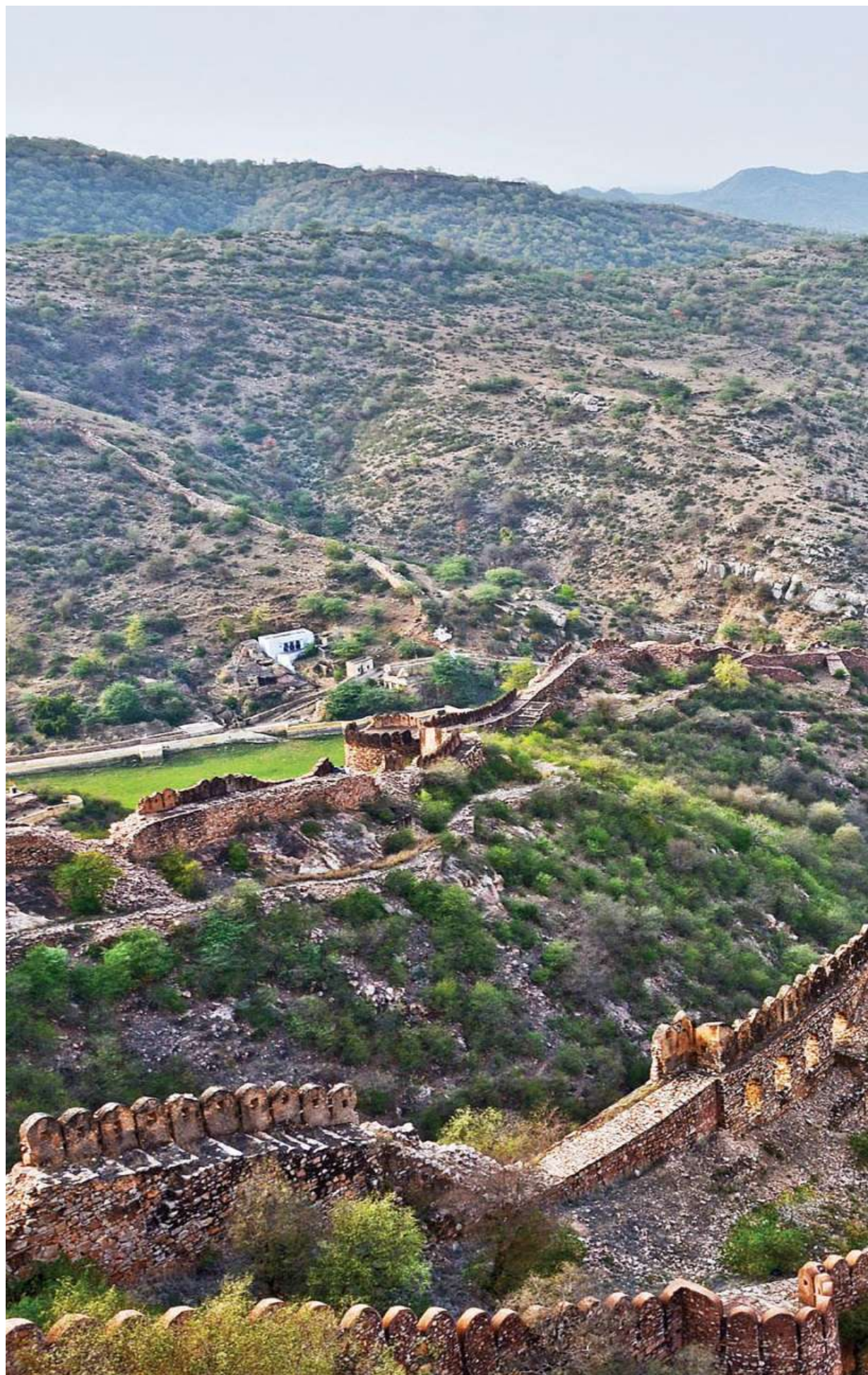
JAIPUR, RAJASTHAN

Twists and turns

I visited Jaigarh Fort in April this year. The fort is situated on Cheel ka Kila (Hill of Eagles), with a spectacular view of its walls and the lake in the foreground, and the magnificent Aravallis in the distance. Jai Singh II built this fort in 1726 to protect the Amber Fort and its palace complex.



Tathagata Das is
a Kolkata-based photographer.





Why not get involved? We'd love to include your best new travel photos (at 300dpi) and the inspiring stories behind them. Send them with a pic of yourself to lpmagazine@wrm.co.in



POSTCARDS



A tunnel connects Jaigarh with Amber Fort, likely used to evacuate members of the royal family during attacks



Known as the Land of High Passes, Leh is India's highest settlement

LEH, LADAKH

Royal ruins

This is a picture of the Leh Palace in Ladakh. Once occupied by Ladakhi royals, the palace today houses some exhibition spaces and a small prayer room. I wanted to capture the beauty of the structure at night, and it took a number of test shots before getting this one right. Luckily for me, the clouds wafted into my frame at the right moment, adding to the beauty of the picture.



Amit Vakil is a photographer who enjoys capturing landscapes.

ANNAMALAI TIGER RESERVE, TAMIL NADU

Greening away

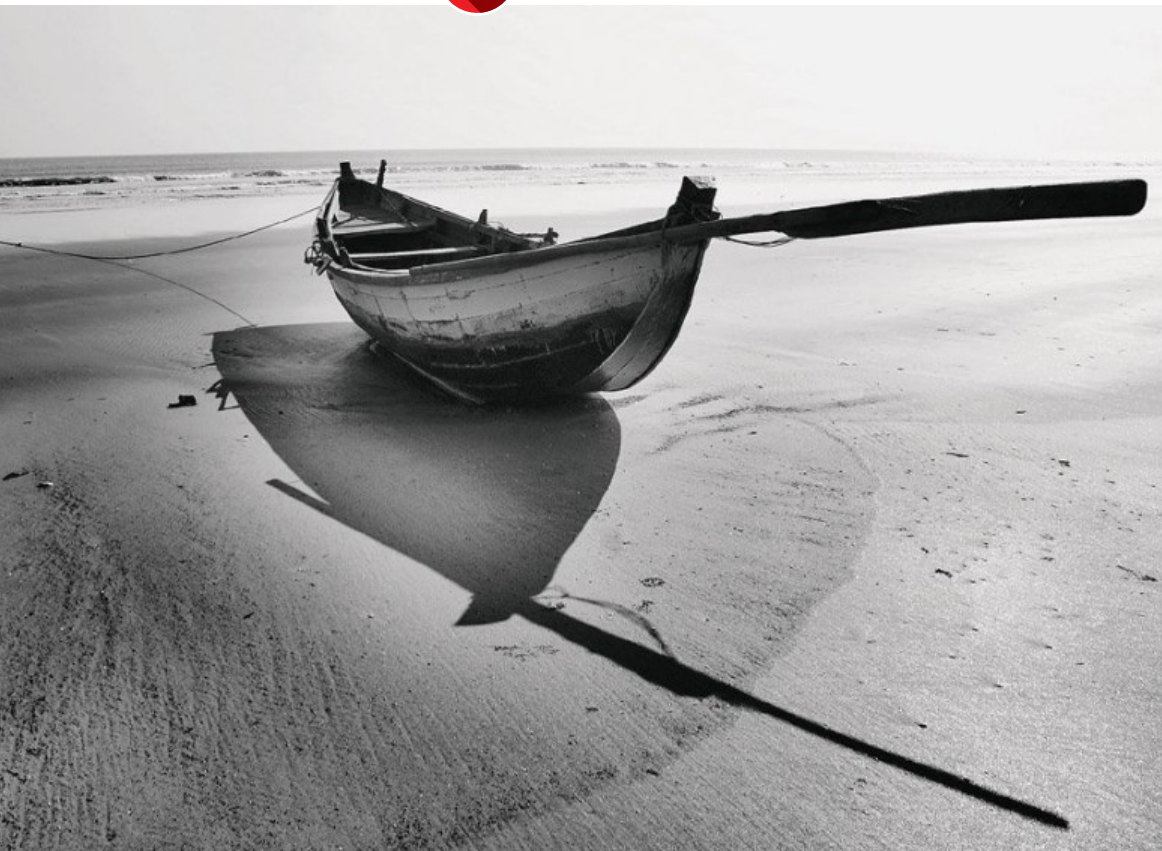
I captured this landscape while we were on a bird-watching trip in the Western Ghats. We had stopped for a bit to witness the sunrise. The first rays of light cut through the trees and hit the tea plantations, and the mist hanging in the air made the moment magical.



Munish Palaniappan is an engineering professional who enjoys photography.



The Western Ghats take their biodiversity hotspot tag very seriously – new species are constantly being discovered here



Digha caught the attention of Warren Hastings, India's first *de facto* Governor General, who called it 'Brighton of the East'

DIGHA, ORISSA

Seas the day

Orissa's Udaipur, unlike its namesake in Rajasthan, is an unexplored virgin beach. Far from the bustle of the city, it is dotted with casuarina trees. You might find yourself all alone here, with the exception of a few huts belonging to fishermen. These fisherfolk also run makeshift stalls on the beach, cooking and selling freshly-caught fish.



Dr Sayan Bhattacharya is a professor of environmental studies at Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata.

NAIROBI NATIONAL PARK, KENYA

Walk a-long

It was evening and we were returning from the national park after having seen some beautiful animals there. Little did we realise that there was another surprise awaiting us. A group of giraffes was playing in the middle of the dirt track, and we stopped our safari vehicle so as to not get in their way. I captured this moment on my camera when one of the tall beauties starting walking away.



Gurgaon-based **Shweta Arora** works with an MNC and wants to explore the world.



As if they aren't tall enough, giraffes also have incredibly long tongues, measuring up to 53cm



Varanasi has 87 *ghats*, built during the rule of the Marathas. Many of them have colourful back stories in legends

VARANASI, UTTAR PRADESH **Fire away**

The Assi Ghat *aarti* needs no introduction. I finally got to witness it in June. My friends and I had just made it in time for the evening *aarti*, but rain interrupted the ceremony, leaving the *ghat* deserted. Disappointed but not defeated, I returned the next morning. The *ghat* looked spectacular despite the cloudy sky. After an hour, I decided to head back to the hotel. That's when I saw this young priest beginning preparations for an *aarti*. I wasted no time in getting my shot!



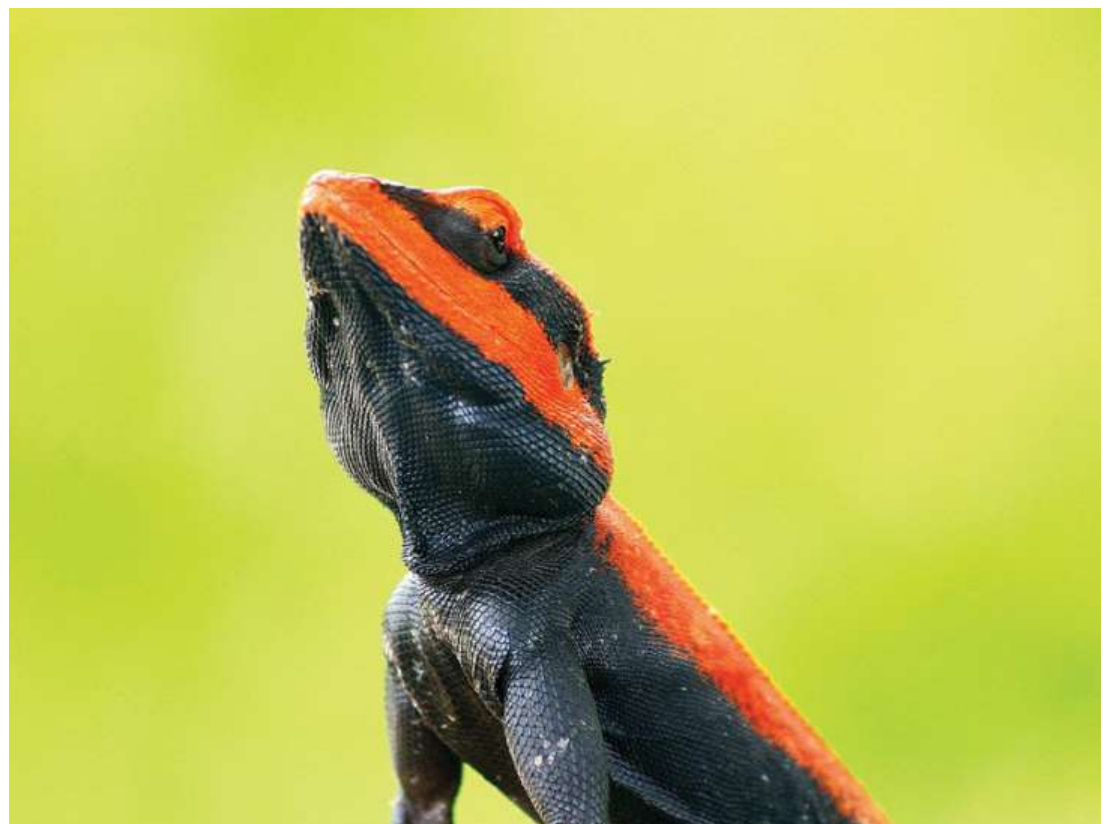
Priyanka Sardana is a freelance graphic designer based in Delhi.

HYDERABAD, TELANGANA **Pop, dart**

I found this peninsular rock agama basking on a boulder at Ramoji Film City in Hyderabad. The monsoon had turned the surroundings green, making for a vivid backdrop. When I tried getting close to take a picture, the creature popped its head up at me as if to ask, "What are you looking at?"



Marketing and sales manager
Kaushir R Raikar is an avid traveller.



Peninsular rock agamas will flatten their bodies the moment a bird flies overhead



Central American agoutis bury seeds to hide them and then forget about them. These seeds then happily grow into trees

**PARQUE NATURAL
METROPOLITANA,
PANAMA**

Agouti time

I was in Panama for the third time, intent on clicking a picture of the keel-billed toucan, but Lady Luck wasn't on my side. I was really upset and started walking back when I saw this little Central American agouti. I stopped immediately and, silently, lay down to take the picture. Soon after, I also managed to spot the toucan I had been waiting for. This little creature turned out to be lucky for me.



Randeep Singh is an industrialist and wildlife photographer.

DOCHULA PASS, BHUTAN

Passing by

This photo was taken at Dochula Pass in Bhutan. People stop their vehicles here for tea, snacks and to take pictures of these *chortens* before continuing onward to Wangdue. When I saw this scene, it was foggy and chock-a-block with vehicles. I waited until all the vehicles had left, and was lucky to catch these four kids running back to their bus.



Gautam Singh is an animation film-maker who loves travelling to new places.



Bhutan's most famous pass is home to 108 *chortens* or *stupas*, a testament to the 2003 Bhutanese war against Indian insurgents



Ravangla promises amazing mountain views. The Ralang, Tashiding, Pemayangtse and Sangachoeling *gompas* are all distantly visible

RAVANGLA, SIKKIM

Parking spot

I like travelling to a new place every year. This year, a friend and I decided to head to Sikkim. When we were in South Sikkim's Ravangla region, our guide told us about a famous Buddha park in the area. The park houses a 40m-high statue of the Buddha at its centre. The site was chosen within the larger religious complex of the Rabong *gomba* (monastery).



Kolkata-based **Saurabh Kulshreshtha** is a travel photographer.

PURI, ORISSA

Rath race

The Rath Yatra takes place in Puri, commemorating Lord Jagannath's annual visit to his birthplace, Gundicha Temple. Around five million people gathered for the festival this year. This shot was taken during the Bahuda Yatra (return festival) from the rooftop of a building. I slowed down the shutter speed on my camera to capture the motion of the chariot and the devotees.



Prasanta Mohanty is a regular contributor to the Postcards section.



The word 'juggernaut', defined as "a massive inexorable force", is derived from Jagannath, much like the unstoppable *yatra*



One of the many colonial buildings in Kolkata, the Writers' Building was so called for the scribes who kept the books

KOLKATA, WEST BENGAL Grey smatter

It was a sunny morning, perfect day for outdoor photography. I couldn't keep my eyes off these beautiful sculptures atop the Victoria Memorial, a masterpiece of British masonry in India. For me, these statues weren't merely stone – they spoke of motherhood and of childhood, and the fond memories we have of that time of our lives.



Suman Malaker is software engineer who is passionate about photography.

HASSAN, KARNATAKA No mean feet

Sravanabelagola in Karnataka is home to this 17.5m-high statue of Gomateshvara (Bahubali) and is one of the most important *tirthas* (pilgrimage destinations) in Jainism. This priest offering prayers to the statue reminded me of our insignificance, as puny humans, in front of the powerful Almighty.



Atanu Paul is a freelance photo artist and straight photography activist.



The name Sravanabelagola translates to 'Monk of the White Pond.'



Pelicans' long beaks and large throat pouches typically become brightly coloured just prior to the breeding season

HOLBOX ISLAND, MEXICO

Pelicans crossing

I had heard about this island north of Cancún, a paradise for people who love to go off the beaten track. After a bus journey, a ferry ride and a short trek, I finally got there. I headed straight to the beach and it was full of pelicans flying to and fro. I spent all afternoon taking photos of these amazing creatures. I was able to capture this one in flight, with his friends (so it seemed) watching. It looked as though they were taking flying lessons.



Lisa Weathers spent two weeks touring the Mexican Riviera, including Tulum and Cancún.

IGUAÇU, BRAZIL

Go with the flow

After a week in the Pantanal, sleeping in hammocks and being bitten by mosquitoes, we needed to soothe our souls. A 14-hour bus ride later, we arrived at Iguaçu Falls. The crashing water made us feel a contentment we couldn't explain. We were later told that the falling water creates ions that improve your mood. The spray that covered us as we explored actually made us happier. We couldn't resist going back the next day.



Lydia Swinscoe, a London-based stylist, was on a year-long round-the-world trip with her boyfriend.



Large, permanent clouds of water spray create an extremely humid micro-climate on the many river islands of Iguaçu Falls



This stretch of US Route 95 lies just south of Beatty, Nevada – an isolated town once home to a mining community

NEVADA, THE USA

Direct marketing

We had just spent two nights in Las Vegas and were heading north towards Lake Tahoe. After a couple of hours travelling through the desert, I saw this lone building in the distance with 'Nude girls' and 'Bikinis' written on it. It seemed so bizarre that it was all on its own in the middle of nowhere. It made me wonder what was going on inside: lots of scantily-clad women sitting around waiting for business on the off chance of someone driving by? This moment was so unexpected.



Esther Semple spent 13 days travelling around California, Nevada and Arizona.

PHOWINTAUNG, MYANMAR

Monking around

We were touring the remote and fascinating Phowintaung cave complex when we came across these little monks taking a break from their studies in an adjacent village. We had seen lots of young novice monks all over Myanmar, but they were generally serious and immersed in prayer, chanting or meditation. It was quite a contrast to see these monks playing just as other little children do all over the world.



Sandeep Kesavan lives in Leeds and spent 10 days in Myanmar.



Buddhist males in Myanmar (Burma) are expected to take up monastic residence twice in their life, often from the age of 10

Around the world!

Here are the winning submissions from the Travel Bites Contest organised by StrayDog™ in association with Traveleyaari

Winner

Ashish is going on an Easy Trip with the LPMI team

Travel beyond the obvious

Our trip to Ladakh was made with the aim of going to parts of it no tourists would explore. We had to carry 60kg of luggage along with 80 litres of petrol on our Thunderbird, since there was no assistance in these remote areas. Even army personnel were surprised to see us at some spots, not expecting any travellers there. We made it through passes, rough terrain, mountain sickness, melting ice and showering stones and broken brakes to complete 2,000km of travel. Needless to say, it turned out to be a soul-searching journey.

– Ashish Puranik

**First
Runner-up**

Into the wild

We all dream of a place far, far away, where we don't have to worry about emails, phone calls and work. One day, I got up, packed my bag and went on a solo trip to the Himalayas. I lived in a tent, trekked 64km to the top of a mountain, explored Parvati Valley, and teared up when I saw the snow-covered Trisul range. The only company I had was that of a dog and a few kids from the nearby village, all of whom became my friends.

– Manish Kumar



**Third
Runner-up**

Morturi te Salutant!

As soon as I entered the arched doorway of the Colosseum in Rome, a gasp of excitement escaped my mouth. At first glance, all you see is the ruins; but in these ruins lies nearly two millennia of history. I could picture myself back in 70 AD, the Colosseum filled with people, and Julius Caesar sitting on his throne. Gladiatorial contests, wild animal flights...everything came to life in the arena.

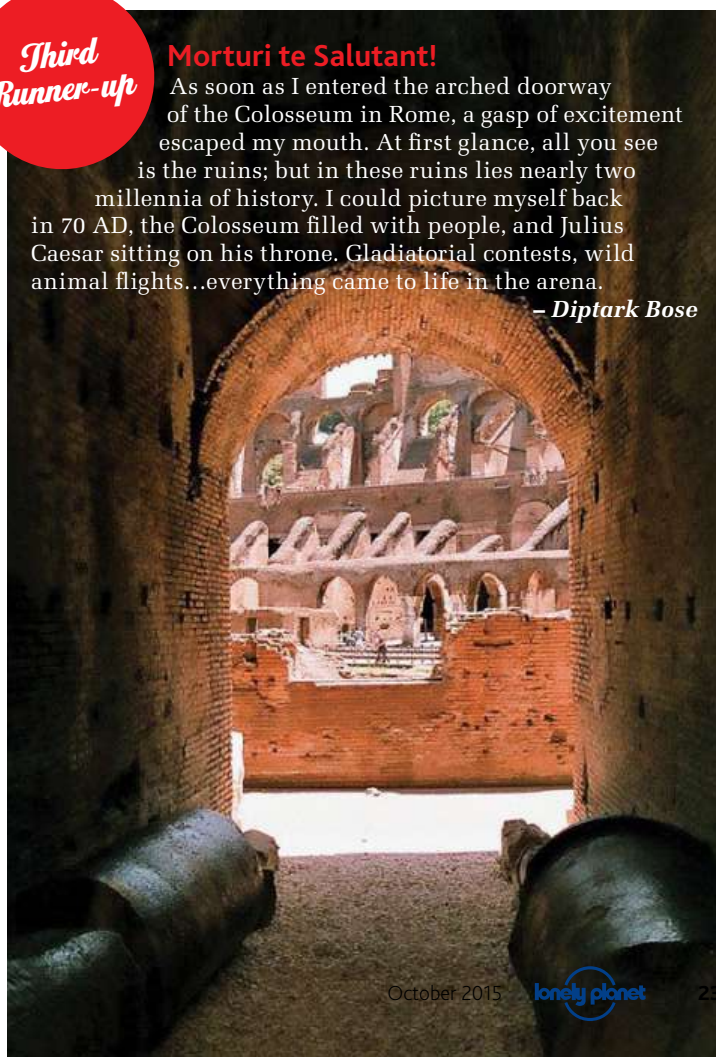
– Diptark Bose

**Second
Runner-up**

On the Inca trail

My trip to Machu Pichhu, the ancient city built by the Incas, was the journey of a lifetime. Today, the site attracts global tourists to South America. Unfortunately, few Indian tourists visit the place, perhaps due to the distance involved, or the lack of awareness. I travelled from Lima to Cusco City by flight. The train ride from Cusco to Machu Pichhu by Peru Rail is perhaps one of the most beautiful train journeys in the world.

– Arvind Kamath



Your Reviews

We'd love to, but we can't travel everywhere, so we want **YOU** to be part of the *Lonely Planet Magazine India* team. We invite you to send in your reviews and suggestions



GULMARG, KASHMIR Snowy stories



Mumbai-based **Saloni Lanjekar** recommends a gondola ride in Kashmir

What worked: Located about 56km from Srinagar, Gulmarg is a popular ski destination. The cable car, also known as a gondola, has two phases. The first phase is at about 10,000ft above sea level, while the second is about 14,000ft above sea level. The nine- to 12-minute ride offers panoramic views of the Himalayas. There are lots of snow activities, like skiing and sledging, to enjoy here too.

What didn't: The queues for the gondola ride are very long (you have to wait at least half an hour). In winter, you have to rent fur coats and gum boots. Also, the gondola tends to stop in the middle for a few minutes, as there is a load-shedding problem here and, in Phase II, you can really feel the lack of oxygen.

MAKE IT HAPPEN: Winters in Gulmarg tend to be very cold. The best time to visit is from March to June – even though it's summer, this destination enjoys snow all year round. You can book the gondola ride online (www.gulmarggondola.com).



MUNNAR, KERALA Head in the clouds



Asmi Vijay Shah from Mumbai recommends a visit to Munnar and Kumarakom in Kerala

What worked: Going by the number of picturesque locations you see while travelling through the state, the title 'God's Own Country' seems fitting. I particularly enjoyed my stay at Coconut Lagoon in Kumarakom. Built on the banks of Vembanad Lake, it's truly a great experience being close to nature and eating healthy, delicious food. I also loved Mountain Club in Munnar, surrounded by beautiful tea gardens. The hotel has an infinity pool, too. We woke up to views of sun-kissed mountains every morning. With the lack of Internet connectivity, you can completely disconnect from the fast pace of city life – such a fantastic getaway.

What didn't: There's some amount of walking involved on the steep slopes at Mountain Club, so it might not be convenient for the elderly.

MAKE IT HAPPEN: Coconut Lagoon: reservations: 00-91-484-3011711; www.cghearth.com/coconut-lagoon, contact@cghearthhotels.com; Kumarakom, Kottayam Mountain Club: 91-4868-249978/9; www.mountainclub.co.in, info@mountainclub.co.in; Chinnakanal, Munnar

This page belongs To YOU

WE'RE TAKING YOUR REVIEWS IN TWO CATEGORIES

1) A 150-word review of a city, region, hotel, restaurant or activity. These have to be open to the general public – you can't put something in that your father-in-law, the Director-General of Somethingorother, arranged by pulling some strings. If it's a hotel, restaurant or activity, we need contact details and prices. And it has to be in two parts. One: what worked for you. Two: what didn't. Don't be shy here; express yourself.

At the end of each review, please mention: phone details, website address, postal address and relevant rates of the place featured.

2) A one-line suggestion to other readers to go somewhere, see something or do something.

Rules

1) In the interests of verification, we need your full name, address, photograph and contact details (your personal as well as official ones), which we might check up on! Only entries with full details will be considered.

2) We will entertain only serious, factual reviews: this is not the place to plug your brother's swanky new resort, or rant about the horrible holiday you had last summer.

PLEASE SEND US PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE PLACES YOU REVIEW OR SUGGEST

Mail in your reviews and suggestions to lpmagazine@www.co.in



Mail in your reviews and feedback to
lpmagazine@wmm.co.in

SHARE WITH US

Letters

Here are your reactions and responses to *Lonely Planet Magazine India*: thank you!

Letter
of the
month

The world in my hands



It's been four years since this magazine began captivating me with its magical journeys to every nook and cranny of the world. I have this weird habit of making sure that I am the first one at home to open the magazine. It's almost like a motion picture, where snapshots and prose bind together and every article sends me off on a rollercoaster ride full of exquisite destinations. My uncle's family is planning a trip to Udaipur, and I was able to come up with a dozen cool ideas with the help of *Lonely Planet Magazine India*. The magazine actually turned out to be my visa, offering me glimpses of my dream city New York in its October 2011 edition ('The Changing Colours of New York'). I was immediately transported to a crisp, cool New York evening, exploring the city in its vibrant autumn colours, being a "flaneur (a person who walks the city in order to experience it)." The magazine amazes me with its ability to offer just a tantalising peek of a place, leaving the rest for me to explore.

– Enisha Choudhury, Guwahati

in my mind and I'm not sure the experience will live up to these fantastic photos. Thank you for ruining travel for me.

– Aiysha S, Surat

Taiwan tales



Be it eating deadly puffer fish or hot-air ballooning over fields, Taiwan ('Maiden Taiwan'; September 2015) truly surprised me. Who knew this tiny nation had such eclectic experiences to offer? I've managed to convince my friends to swap Bangkok for Taiwan for our annual Christmas break too. The Make it Happen section at the end is a great ready reckoner; I plan to use it extensively to plan my trip. In general, the September issue was full of great ideas. I liked Singapore for Women ('Ladies Day Out') as well as the feature on Maharashtrian food ('More than misal'), which was a feast for the senses!

– Shravan T, Hyderabad

A destination in my pocket



The Mini Guides section in the September 2015 issue was an eye-opener for me. I wouldn't have thought that the words 'affordable' and 'Monaco' could be used together in the same sentence, or, for that matter, even, the words 'wildlife' and 'Gujarat'. But *LPMI* proved me wrong, and happily so.

– Rohan D, Bangalore

20 Plus Romantic Ideas (September 2014), which bring out the flavour of love in each destination; or even the Road Trips Special (April 2013). I also enjoy The Winter List (October) each year, which has the perfect destinations in which to enjoy the magic of winter, and also the issue on Switzerland, which evokes sheer pleasure and peace. 'A Year of Experiences' (January) is another theme that I love, as it's a perfect package with travel ideas and stories from adventure, luxury and more. Thank you, *LPMI*, for bringing emotional elements into each issue and establishing a strong connect with all us readers.

– Prachi Jain, via email

Imprinted images



The Postcards in the September 2015 issue (*Travel for Value*) blew my mind. From the geisha in Japan and the busker in Turkey to the wolf in Madhya Pradesh and the tiger in Rajasthan, all those images are embedded in my mind forever. Of course, this is going to make my travels to these destinations very difficult, as I will always compare what I see to these images

Emotional connect



I am sure that Team *LPMI* is often praised for its amazing travel pieces, stunning visuals, detailed information and mind-blowing travel tips, but, more than this, the magazine also beautifully brings emotion into all its travel features – be it the August issue on 35 Plus Easy Adventures, which was truly adrenaline pumpin', or past issues like

The writer of this issue's Letter of the Month wins this Viari Passport Cover, Manhattan Card Holder and L Wallet in black. To write in to the magazine, email us at, lpmagazine@wmm.co.in

MANHATTAN PASSPORT COVER, MANHATTAN CARD HOLDER, L WALLET

Engineered from soft, genuine Cow Banjo leather, the über smart Manhattan Collection from Viari is a must-have for the metrosexual man on the move. Take the Manhattan Passport Cover for instance. This sleek case for your passport also stores your travel documents, ticket and credit cards with ease. The Manhattan Card Holder keeps all your cards efficiently in one place, while the stylish L Wallet is designed to store your cash neatly. For more details on the Manhattan collection, log on to www.viari.in

The writer of this issue's Letter of the Month wins this Viari Passport Cover, Manhattan Card Holder and L Wallet in black. To write in to the magazine, email us at, lpmagazine@wmm.co.in



AND FOR THAT ONE MOMENT YOU ARE ONE WITH THE UNIVERSE.



TRAVEL WELL

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A WORLD OF TRAVEL NEWS AND DISCOVERIES

PG 36 **World on your Plate:** Raw papaya brings on the crunch in the Thai salad, *som tam*

PG 34 **Country at a Glance:** Allow the islands of **Cape Verde** to charm your pants off

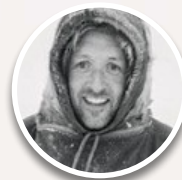
PG 28 **The Photo Story:** Evocative – and just plain cute – photographs bring life in winter on the Arctic Circle to our pages

Active volcanoes,
canyons, desert plains,
beaches and cute
camels all vie for
space in Cape Verde.
In Country at a Glance
(pg 34)



The Photo Story

CRISTIAN BARNETT



Into the cold

I was on a flight to Sweden when I saw the Arctic Circle on a map and decided that it would be an amazing place to do a portrait project. My first journey north was in 2006, and, since then, I've made 13 trips and visited all eight countries that reach the Arctic Circle; my pictures were taken within 56 kilometres of it. One of the most exciting things was going to places simply because they were there, places that people never visit. It's difficult to imagine how isolated some were – the settlement of Zhigansk in Russia is almost 600 kilometres from the nearest town. I found the quality of life varied a lot: in Scandinavia, it was high, while, in the east of Russia, nomadic people were living at subsistence level. But the unifying factor everywhere was how friendly people were. They were pleased to see visitors, and proud to share the best of their communities. I loved being part of their lives, albeit briefly. It was an intense, incredible way to travel.

Cristian Barnett is a food and travel photographer based in London (www.crisbarnett.com). To see more of his project, visit lifeontheline.org.uk.



SWEDEN: Annikka Tuohino worked for the tourist office in the district of Övertorneå, and was very proud of where she lived. I enquired about what visitors liked to do, and, when she suggested the outdoor hot tub, I asked if we could photograph her in one. One of the things I like about being a photographer is that you can ask people to do crazy things, and, more often than not, they'll agree



SWEDEN: It was -28°C when I took this photo of Hans Bengtsson, a sausage-maker, at the Jokkmokk Winter Market, which occurs right on the Arctic Circle. Originally a trade fair between the Sámi people and Swedes, it has run every year for the last 400 years, and is quite famous in Sweden. Hans was a complete character, and he described himself as a 'master of glibness, and a sausage poet' and was known to everyone as 'Vild-Hasse', or 'Wild-Horse' →



FINLAND: I was driving through the Sonka region when I saw Matti Härkönen's ice church. He told me that he builds one every year, using ice from his garden. His back hadn't been very good that year, so the church was a little smaller than usual



RUSSIA: Our taxi driver Zilya loved this statue on the outskirts of Salekhard, which is known for its mammoth finds, including a mummified baby mammoth



RUSSIA: Ivan and Yevdokia lived in a home for the elderly in Zhigansk. It had a lovely atmosphere; when we were there, people were singing and playing music



RUSSIA: These children are nomadic Nenets from the Yamal Peninsula. They seemed to have a great life – always busy working, but laughing all the time



RUSSIA: Like most Nenets, Evgeny lived in a tent called a *chum* and travelled with hundreds of reindeer, moving every couple of days to find more food for them →



ALASKA: Albert (in the yellow shirt) lived with his extended family in the log cabin he built – it's the tallest structure in Fort Yukon, a small First Nation community



ALASKA: Stacy Harris of Kotzebue came from a community of Inuit hunters. For her, wearing fur was about her history and culture; it was a matter of pride



CANADA: I saw these husky pups in the town of Repulse Bay. Adult huskies are always tied up outdoors, but pups never venture far so are free to wander



CANADA: Father Daniel Szwarc was a priest at Repulse Bay's Catholic mission. Originally from Poland, he delivered mass in the local Inuit language, Inuktitut →

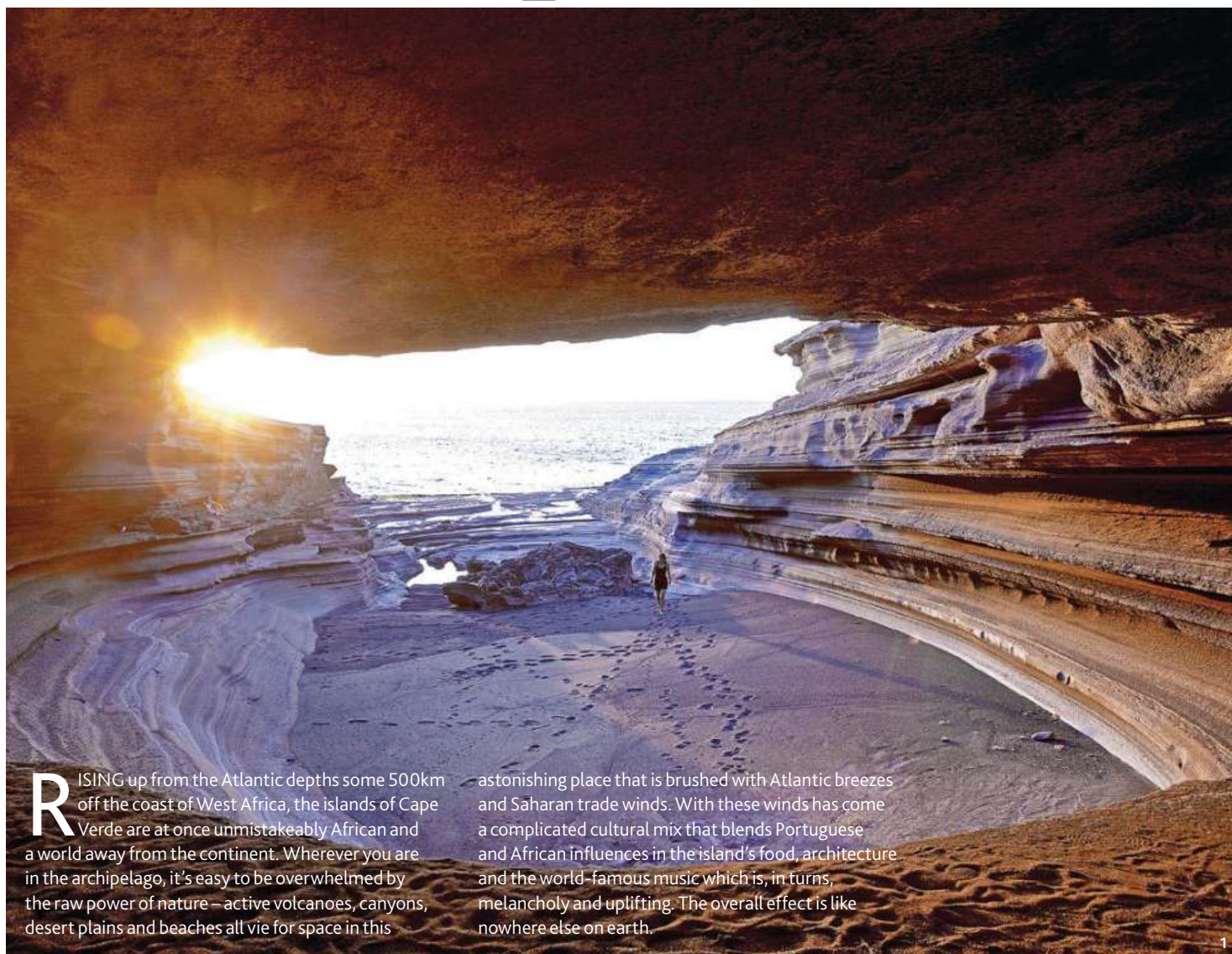


GREENLAND: Sisters Dorthe and Ellen were celebrating their niece's first day at senior school. In Greenland, it's customary for families to join children when they start school, wearing traditional costume. There is beadwork in their costumes – beads were one of the first items the Danish brought to trade with the Inuit of Greenland ©

Country at a Glance



Cape Verde



RISING up from the Atlantic depths some 500km off the coast of West Africa, the islands of Cape Verde are at once unmistakably African and a world away from the continent. Wherever you are in the archipelago, it's easy to be overwhelmed by the raw power of nature – active volcanoes, canyons, desert plains and beaches all vie for space in this

astounding place that is brushed with Atlantic breezes and Saharan trade winds. With these winds has come a complicated cultural mix that blends Portuguese and African influences in the island's food, architecture and the world-famous music which is, in turns, melancholy and uplifting. The overall effect is like nowhere else on earth.

TOP THINGS TO SEE

- * **Mindelo**, Cape Verde's prettiest city with a moon-shaped bay, stark mountains and a lovely old quarter
- * **São Filipe**, a gorgeous town, set high on the cliffs and with colonial architecture
- * **Porto Do Sol**, one of the wildest and most beautiful coastlines in Africa
- * The UNESCO World Heritage-listed remnants of West Africa's first European settlement, **Cidade Velha**
- * The sandy beaches, desert plains and verdant mountainous interior of **Santiago**

TOP THINGS TO DO

- * Trek alongside the precipitous cliffs and green valleys of **Santa Antão**.

- * Dive into the famous **Mardi Gras** festivities on Mindelo.
- * Windsurf the giant waves off the islands of **Sal** and **Boa Vista**.
- * Climb to Cape Verde's highest point, the active volcano of **Mt Fogo** (2829m).
- * Take up residence in a smoky bar to hear Cape Verde's unmistakable *mornas* (mournful old-style music).

GETTING UNDER THE SKIN

Read poet Jorge Barbosa's *Arquipélago*, which is laden with melancholic reflections on the sea; or Basil Davidson's *The Fortunate Isles*.

Watch *Fintar o Destino* (Dribbling Fate) by Fernando Vendrell, a very African tale of a young footballer

Capital:
Praia

Population:
429,474

Area: 4033sqkm

Official languages:
Portuguese & Crioulo

TRADEMARKS

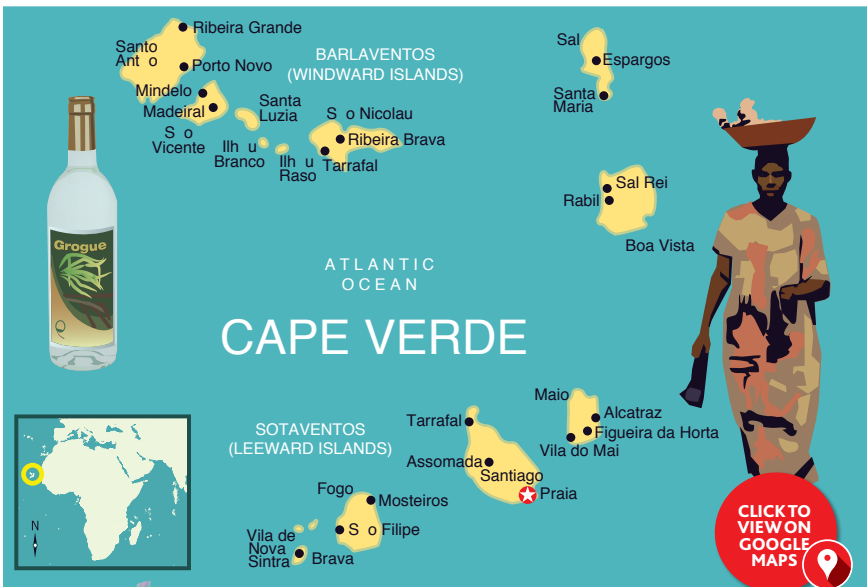
Afro-Portuguese cultural mix; one of the stars of African economic development; Cesária Évora, and other Cape Verdean music; wild volcanic beauty

BEST TIMES TO VISIT

October to August

RANDOM FACT

Cape Verde has the highest adult literacy (83.8 per cent) and life expectancy (71.1 years) of any West African country.

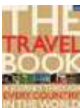


torn between dreams of Europe and his home in the islands.

Listen to Cape Verde’s barefoot diva, Cesária Évora, and her heartbreaking *mornas* and *coladeiras* (sentimental love songs).

Eat the national dish *cachupa* (a tasty stew of beans, corn and meat or fish).

Drink Ceris (the local beer); *grogue* (the local sugarcane spirit); and white or *róse* wines from Fogo.



GET MORE: This excerpt is from Lonely Planet’s *The Travel Book: Journey through every country in the world*, available through lonelyplanet.com or at your local bookstore.



IN A WORD
Ja lon
(I’m fine)

- 1, 2 & 5. A bustling beach, colourful market and tranquil square in Mindelo
3. Surfing the giant waves off Boa Vista
4. An atmospheric sandy beach in Santiago
6. The sea is omnipresent in Cape Verde

World on your Plate

Som Tam

*Thailand***KEEP IT VEG!**

Omit the dried prawns and adjust the seasoning accordingly

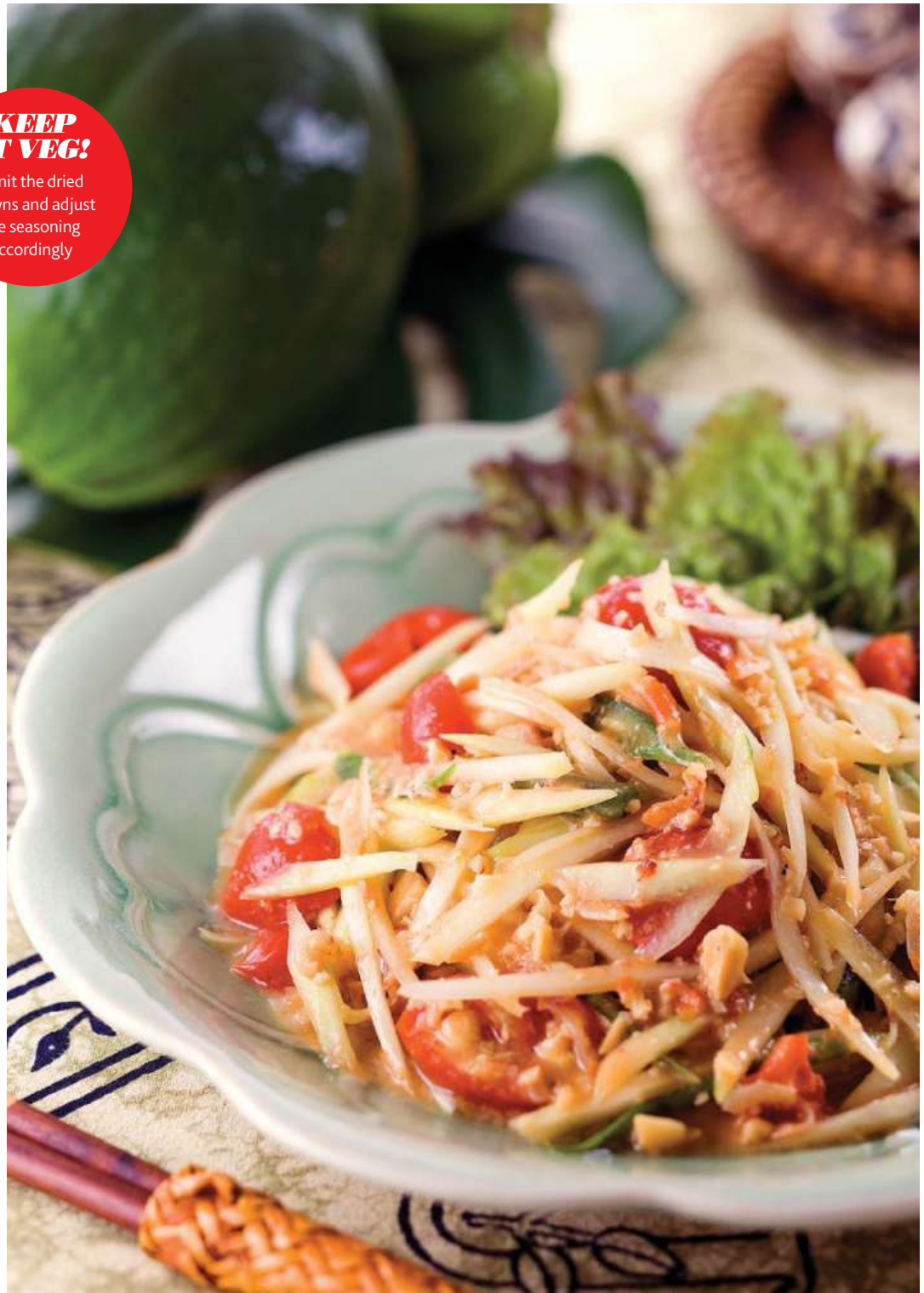
RAW papaya makes the perfect vehicle for quintessential Thai flavours – spicy, sour, salty and sweet – in a crunchy salad that makes a great snack or a light meal.

- * 4 garlic cloves
- * Salt
- * 4 bird's eye chillies
- * 3 tbsp roasted peanuts
- * 3 tbsp dried prawns, rinsed and dried
- * 1 tbsp lime juice
- * 8 cherry tomatoes, quartered
- * 4 long beans, chopped
- * 3 cups shredded green papaya

FOR THE DRESSING:

- * 4 tbsp palm sugar
- * 3 tbsp fish sauce
- * 2 tbsp tamarind concentrate
- * 3 tbsp lemon juice

1. Make the dressing by mixing the palm sugar, fish sauce, tamarind concentrate and 3 tbsp lime juice.
2. Using a large mortar and pestle, crush the garlic with some salt, then add the bird's eye chillies, roasted peanuts, dried prawns and the 1 tbsp lime juice. Pound until it resembles a coarse paste.
3. Add the cherry tomato quarters and long beans and lightly bruise (but do not crush) into the paste.
4. Place the shredded green papaya in large salad bowl, stir in the garlic-chilli paste and the dressing and gently toss with a large spoon.



PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES PHOTOGRAPH USED FOR REPRESENTATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY

Anything to Declare?

Go to Kenya for her people

SELF-CONFESSED TRAVEL ADDICT, VEEJAY RAMONA ARENA IGNORED THE NAYSAYERS TO VISIT KENYA



I travel because I love every aspect of it – though not perhaps the visa application process. I travel because I love the planet's diversity. I can connect with people – sometimes without language, be a part of their lives and lifestyles. When I travel, I lose myself, find myself, leave certain parts of me behind and come back with something new – besides a fridge magnet.

But, when I decided to visit Kenya, I met with a lot of resistance from literally everyone back home: "Don't go. It's not safe. But Ebola... But Somali pirates... You'll be robbed. You'll be kidnapped..." I could go on. It got worse after the US and UK Embassies issued travel warnings against it. And then again, I would be a single girl, travelling all alone. My mother convinced herself I had a death wish.

So I made my will. And I went to Kenya.

One and a half months isn't nearly enough to experience Kenya.

The landscapes – the sea, the hills, the wildlife, the desert, the mountains – are to die



Best known as VJ Ramona, **Ramona Arena** is also an event and television show host, scriptwriter and singer. She believes in the spontaneity of travel

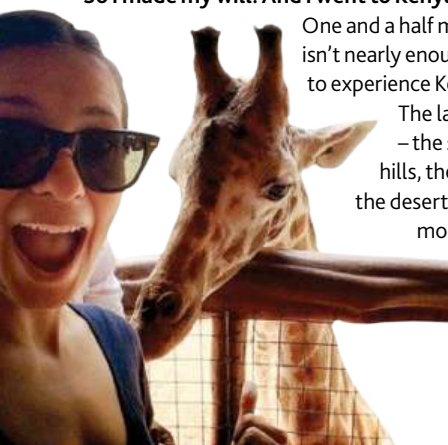
for, and the cosmopolitan city of Nairobi has it all. But what really made me fall in love with Kenya was its people.

I was invited by a friend's friend who works for AMREF, one of the leading health development organisations in Africa, to visit Kibera, Kenya's biggest slum. I met a 17-year-old who had just given birth to a baby girl. She smiled as she sat with her mother and her newborn baby, happy to share a moment of her life with a stranger. I visited schools in little villages, talked to teachers who constantly interact with local tribes and communities to convince them to get their girls and boys educated.

I was even stranded in the middle of the ocean on a small fishing boat at around 9pm, with just a fisherman and everything around as dark

as ebony. We weren't that far from the border of Somalia. After failed attempts to restart the boat's engine, he decided to jump into the ocean and pull the boat as close as he could to shore. Then he let down the anchor and swam in to get help, leaving me all alone. I resigned myself to the situation, crouched low so as not to attract any attention as a few boats passed by. I have never seen a sky with more stars in my life. Then a boat pulled up. The fisherman had returned with two friends. He apologised profusely, got his friends to drop me back safely and would not be paid. This, despite the coast being hit the hardest by lack of tourism.

I experienced many such moments with the genuinely warm, open and good people during my time in Kenya. Whether I met them at a five-star hotel or whether they were poor tribals or cab drivers, I found they wanted me – especially as a foreigner – to feel safe, happy and at home. I'm glad I didn't pay heed to the warnings. It's good to be aware of situations, but don't believe everything you're told. Do your research. Speak to locals, check out Instagram posts and local newspapers, look at the latest traveller reviews. For Kenya, in particular, I will say this: it is as safe as any other country in today's world. You just have to be smart and alert. If I had underestimated the goodness of so many people who are now friends, I would have missed out on one of the best trips of my life.





Two sides to...

London

Day

STAY

Sited opposite the Royal Mews of Buckingham Palace, a step away from London's top attractions, **The Rubens at the Palace** guarantees royal treatment. Don't miss the afternoon tea at the Palace Lounge, overlooking the Mews (00-44-20-7834-6600; www.rubenshotel.com; bookrb@archmail.com; 39, Buckingham Palace Rd; from ₹ 18,950 with breakfast;).

SEE



A great amalgam of architectural styles, **Westminster Abbey** is deeply significant in British history. A coronation church and treasure house of artefacts and paintings, the lovely abbey is also where some of Britain's notables have been buried or honoured. Keep an eye out for the famous commoners entombed here, especially in Poets' Corner (00-44-20-7222-5152; www.westminster-abbey.org; 20, Dean's Yard; see [website for timing](http://www.westminster-abbey.org); entry from ₹ 1,950).

DO

Adorned with quirky and provocative graffiti by some of the world's most popular street artists, East London is one of the new hubs of the growing Street Art movement. Uncover this hidden London with **East End Tours' Street Art Walk**, and discover some revolutionary ideas hidden within the grungy alleys of Brick Lane or Whitechapel (00-44-74-3202-6168; www.streetartlondontour.com; tickets from ₹ 1,000; 11am Fri – Sat).



EAT

Head to **The Biscuiteers**, London's first biscuit boutique and icing café, to try icing a biscuit, or to just eat a whole lot more.

Nestled away on Notting Hill, this unique café offers lots of treats to browse through, and an endless range of themed biscuits. Pick up a personalised tin (00-44-87-0458-8358; www.biscuiteers.com; 18, Stannary St; 10am – 6pm; [personalised biscuit tins](http://www.biscuiteers.com) from ₹ 3,000).



DRINK

A café by day and bar by night, **Drink, Shop, Do's** policy is clear. Sip cherry blossom tea at this King's Cross establishment, play musical bingo or put on your dancing shoes and boogie the night away to some terrific old-school tracks (00-44-20-7278-4335; www.drinkshopdo.com; 9, Caledonian Rd, King's Cross; entry to bar free till 10 pm, ₹ 300 after; cherry blossom tea: ₹ 380).

Night

STAY

The **Hoxton** at Shoreditch, right in the midst of East London's hip nightlife scene, offers funky yet minimalist décor, along with a free 'rip-off' fridge and breakfast bags delivered to your doorstep. The hotel also runs an eclectic 'Hoxtown' blog around local events, and organises many of them within the hotel itself (00-44-20-7550-1000; www.hoxtown.com; 81, Great Eastern St; from ₹ 19,800 with breakfast).

SEE

See London in all its sparkly golden splendour from the **London Eye**. At 135m high, the landmark offers views about 40km in every direction.

If you wish to tweak up your experience a notch, go for a Vinopolis wine tasting experience, inclusive of two 30-minute rotations and five varieties of premium wine with an expert from Vinopolis (www.londoneye.com; Riverside Bldg, County Hall, Westminster Bridge Rd; see [website for timings](http://www.londoneye.com); Vinopolis Wine Tasting experience from ₹ 4,950; standard tickets from ₹ 1,900, cheaper if booked online).

DO

Opened in the late '70s, **The Comedy Store**, in the West End, is a great place for a spot of live comedy, including alternative and improvisational comedy (www.thecomedy.co.uk; 1a, Oxendon St; check [website for timings, prices and event schedule](http://www.thecomedy.co.uk)).



EAT

At the **Northbank Restaurant**, enjoy a contemporary British menu with a unique Cornish twist while you enjoy a rare view of the Thames from the city side. The restaurant's private terrace offers unmatched views of London's most iconic landmarks along the South Bank, with St Paul's Cathedral a short walk away (00-44-20-7329-9299; www.northbankrestaurant.com; Millennium Bridge, One Paul's Walk; mains from ₹ 1,850).



DRINK

One of the most sought-after historic pubs in the city, the **Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese** is a delight; open since 1667, the fantastic menu includes an extensive range of lagers, wines and ales within an archaic interior that has served countless literary grandees and journalists (00-44-20-7353-6170; www.visitlondon.com; 145, Fleet St; 12pm – 11pm Mon – Sat; mains from ₹ 1,100).

Alcatraz

San Francisco

FOR the inmates of America's most notorious prison, cell walls and gun-toting guards were only the first obstacles to any escape plan. More than a mile of the freezing currents of San Francisco Bay lies between the island and the mainland; no prisoners are known to have made it across.

The island was named by the Spanish in 1775 after an archaic word for a kind of seabird, possibly a pelican. It became a US army base in 1850, before being converted into a maximum-security federal penitentiary in 1934. Alcatraz closed in 1963. The site was taken over from 1969 to 1971 in a protest by activists from the American Indian Movement. It has since become a protected landmark and one of San Francisco's most popular visitor attractions.

MAKE IT HAPPEN

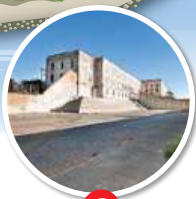
Regular Alcatraz tours, including the ferry trip and an audio guide, cost ₹1,800 (nps.gov/alca). Lonely Planet's *California* has more on San Francisco.



1

BEACON OF DESPAIR

Automated since 1963, the Alcatraz Island Light stands 26m tall. It dates from 1909 and is the second on the island. The original beacon, damaged in the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, was much shorter. When it was first lit in 1854, it was the first lighthouse on the Pacific coast of the US.



2

IF THEY PLAYBALL

Inmates at Alcatraz had four rights: food, clothing, shelter and medical care. Anything else had to be earned by good behaviour. Time in the recreation yard on weekends was one of those simple pleasures, and prisoners organised themselves into four minor and four major softball teams.



3

INSTITUTIONAL DINING

The food on Alcatraz was said to be the best in the US prison system. Prisoners could help themselves to as much as they wanted, although they were punished if they failed to finish their food. Cutlery in the dining hall was counted in and counted out to prevent inmates pocketing potential weapons or chiselling devices.



4

LOSING FACE

On June 11, 1962, Frank Morris and brothers John and Clarence Anglin made the most famous of the 14 escape attempts staged at Alcatraz, using spoons, improvising drills and fashioning dummy heads to place on their pillows (*John Anglin's is above*). All three remain officially missing, presumed drowned.



5

ALL BY MYSELF

Conditions were better in some ways than at other prisons, but nobody wanted to be put on D-Block. Here, prisoners were kept in isolation, apart from two shower visits and a solo trip to the recreation yard each week. Worst of all were cells 9 to 14, dubbed The Hole (*above*), while the pitch-black Strip Cell was bare save for a hole in the floor.



India



Arrivals

Myanmar



HIT THE ROAD

You don't need to look too far for your next road trip: the first leg of the **ASIAN HIGHWAY** – AH 1 – which will ultimately connect India, Myanmar and Thailand by road, is now open. The nearly 26km Myawaddy-Thinggan Nyenaung-Kawkareik section in Myanmar has become operational, and we can't wait for the rest to follow. Hello, *pad Thai*!



CARPOOLING FOR WILDLIFE?

Hit your next wildlife destination with like-minded travellers. **THE SAFARIST** allows wildlife enthusiasts to list their next dream trip. You connect with them to join their trip, or create a trip of your own so people can connect with you. You even get notifications when others are travelling to locations on your wish list. The perks of travelling with others? Reduced travel costs, co-travellers as driven as you, and, of course, new friends (www.thesafarist.com).

Beer and burgers at Palladium Social

Social has launched its third outlet in Mumbai, this time at Palladium in Lower Parel. However, the **PALLADIUM SOCIAL** is different from its older siblings, equipped with a very cool craft beer tasting room. Touted as the first of its kind in India, it features 12 craft beers on tap from local breweries like White Owl and The Gateway Brewing Co. And what better to pair with beer than burgers? The new burger menu has fun options, like the Potato & Beet Röesti Burger, and the *bao*-esque Crispy Lamb Burger (www.socialoffline.in; beer from ₹ 225/330ml, burgers from ₹ 230).



5 Minutes with Peter Watts

Peter is the founder and director of Premier Explore, which offers travel experiences tailored around English Premier League games

I travelled extensively after graduating college, and my favourite places so far have been Vietnam, Ghana and New Zealand... Vietnam is just so diverse in terms of its history. The variety of landscapes, of what it has to offer, is so unusual to find in one country. Ghana, I love for its people. They're so beautiful, warm and welcoming. New Zealand is naturally stunning. You come out of the supermarket and the views are just incredible.

Football is my passion...

On my travels, I've come to realise how into football people across the world are. In the UK, it's like a religion, an essential part of our culture; that's something that I want to share with the world. I don't think football matches get as boisterous anywhere else. Sitting in a stadium, with the chanting... it's a great experience, even if you aren't a fan of the game.

I think football in India is really going to keep growing... there needs to be development at the grassroots level, but, with the Indian Super League coming in, I think it's going to happen.

In the business we're in, you get used to unusual requests, and try your best to meet your customers' needs. I once had a client ask me to organise a meeting with the designer of Kate Middleton's wedding shoes.

Next on my list is South America... Peru, Brazil, Argentina. They're big football countries, too! I really want to watch a football match in Brazil. The games are apparently crazy!





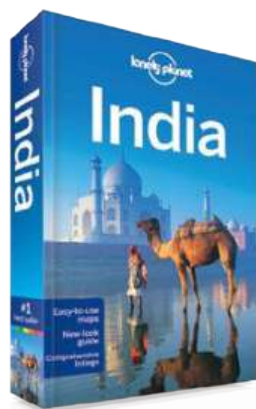
'APPY DAYS

Want to hear a story or a fascinating bit of trivia the next time you're wandering through a famous monument? Starting with the Red Fort in New Delhi, the **CaptivaTour** app, an audio guide for iconic monuments, gives history lessons a twist with curious tales, interesting nuggets and photos. There are more coming soon; think Qutub Minar, the Taj Mahal and the like (<http://captivatour.com>; for Android).



PENGUINS + PAJAMAS - IN ONE NIGHT!

The California Academy of Sciences will host the season's first PENGUINS + PAJAMAS SLEEPOVER on October 16, 2015. Get a bunch of friends together, plunk your sleeping bag down by your favourite exhibit, see the penguins get ready for bed, star-gaze at the after-hours planetarium show and stuff your face with milk and cookies at story time. Ready to revert to childhood? (www.calacademy.org; from ₹7,233/person)



NEW FROM LONELY PLANET

This month, Lonely Planet's releases include new editions of **INDIA** (₹2,400); **RAJASTHAN, DELHI & AGRA** (₹1,920); **GOA & MUMBAI** (₹1,508); and **SOUTH INDIA & KERALA** (₹1,920).

Each comes packed with places to visit, food to try and top experiences (<https://shop.lonelyplanet.in/>).

Google in the House

If you use the **GOOGLE NOW** app, you'll know just how much it can tell you about the world, and your life. Book a cab to the airport for your flight, and it will tell you what time to leave depending upon the traffic. Particularly fun for Indians, Google Maps has added landmark directions to routes, telling you which cinema to take a left from or what purple building to go straight past (the little grey line below the standard black directions). And, if you type in where you're going, Google Now will likely tell you the busiest times of day to *not* visit, say, Esselworld, or open images in Maps and get a 360° view of a restaurant you want to check out. Change the language on your phone to English (India) and it will recognise our lovely sing-song accent, or turn on Hindi and search in the mother tongue. Brace yourselves: Google Now is here to stay.

Now, if only it had a cool name like Siri!

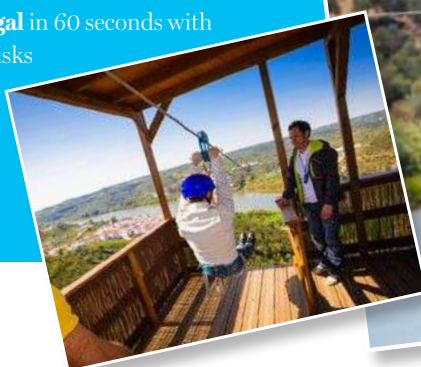


Thailand



From Spain to Portugal in a minute

You can whoosh your way from **Spain** to **Portugal** in 60 seconds with **LIMITEZERO**'s new zip-line. The journey whisks holiday goers from Sanlucar de Guadiana in Spain to Alcoutim in Portugal, having them travel back in time by an hour (www.limitezero.com; ₹1,300/person/ride).





Travel News

Packages

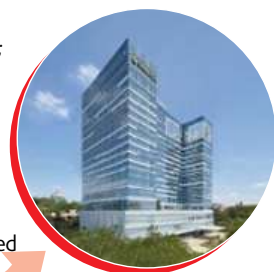
1 **WHY:** For a heritage break
WHERE: Ranbanka Palace, Jodhpur
WHAT: The two-night **Royal Rapture** package (from ₹ 22,000/ couple) includes accommodation in the Jodhana Wing, customised breakfast and dinner from a select menu, one spa therapy per couple, a full day of sightseeing, happy hours at the bar with a 1+1 offer, free wi-fi, airport transfers and late check-out till 4pm (www.ranbankahotels.com; till Oct 31, 2015).

BOOK
NOW!



2 **WHY:** Because you need a great base for your spiritual sojourn
WHERE: Ganga Kinare, Rishikesh
WHAT: The **Spiritual Getaway** package, at ₹ 12,700/ person for a Deluxe Room, includes a two night-three day stay with breakfast, use of Firefox bikes with a biking trail map, free wi-fi, complimentary in-house morning and evening Ganga aarti, and a documentary screening from the in-house DVD collection (www.gangakinare.com; all year round).

3 **WHY:** Because there's a new hotel in Bangalore!
WHERE: Shangri-La, Bangalore
WHAT: At this newly-opened hotel, the **special introductory package** has rooms starting at ₹ 9,500/ night on double occupancy basis and includes credit of ₹ 3,000 to be redeemed against any hotel service (www.shangri-la.com; till Dec 31, 2015).



Shrek the sheep who loved his wool

Far, far away, in New Zealand, there lives a sheep named Shrek, who disliked being sheared so very much that he did the next best thing he could think of: he ran away and hid in a cave for six long years. Of course, over time, he turned into a giant, fluffy ball of wool, and, when the poor dear was finally discovered by his farmer pop, he had grown enough fleece to make 20 suits. So we hear. We do love a sheep thrill.



New! New! New!



Ganpatipule's got a new - relatively posh - kid on the block. The **BLUE OCEAN RESORT & SPA**, quite luxurious as far as most hotels here go, has plush rooms and garden villas, a multi-cuisine restaurant, an al fresco bar, a spa, pool and easy beach access (www.blueoceanresort.in).



SPLURGE!

HOUSE ON THE HILL

Six Senses Ninh Van Bay, Vietnam, has launched its most exclusive villa yet - the three-bedroomed **HILLTOP RESERVE** - with wow-worthy views of the bay, the adjacent mountains and of Nha Trang city. Pick from 200 movies to watch on the HD TV in the living room, lounge in the bedrooms with exposed-beam ceilings, and laze away in the air-conditioned, ensuite bathrooms that come equipped with crafted wooden bathtubs and fixtures. Mealtimes are special too: get the chef to whip you up a meal in your villa, and pair it with wines from the wine cellar. There's also a massive private infinity pool to lose yourself in (www.sixsenses.com; from ₹ 1,86,000).

MARK YOUR CALENDAR!

OCTOBER 22 – 25, 2015, NOVEMBER 1, 2015

WHAT: The San Francisco International South Asian Film Festival: Bollywood and Beyond

WHERE: San Francisco, the USA

The six-day showcase of films hosts documentaries, shorts, narratives and the best of independent cinema from South Asia and the diaspora.

MORE: www.sanfrancisco.travel



NOVEMBER 2015 – JANUARY 2016

WHAT: Christmas and New Year markets

WHERE: Vienna, Austria

The market at Rathausplatz is the largest and best known – expect a Christmas workshop for kids, 150 stalls and beautiful-decorated trees.

MORE: www.christkindlmarkt.at



NOVEMBER 23 – 28, 2015

WHAT: The Lanuza Surfing Festival

WHERE: Lanuza, the Philippines

The awesome swells this time of year see international, national and local surfers performing on surfboards, long boards and skim boards.

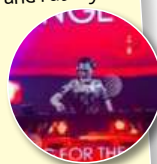
DECEMBER 18 – 20, 2015

WHAT: The Enchanted Valley Carnival 2015

WHERE: Aamby Valley City, Maharashtra

The line-up at this year's camping music festival includes superstars Tiësto and Fatboy Slim. There's also a new call-out – #JoinTheTribe – to build a community of enthusiasts.

MORE: Book tickets at <http://www.evc.co.in>



LPMI
READER
OFFER

MARRY AT THE UPPER DECK

Nestled in the Lonavala Valley in Maharashtra, **THE UPPER DECK RESORT** offers a perfect location alongside a host of other comforts and amenities to make your wedding memorable. Use the promo code 'LPvows2015', to avail of a 25 per cent on the premium cottages (<http://upperdeckresort.com/>).

PHOTOGRAPHS: PAUL FLEET/123RF (DRONE), ANEK SUWANNAPHOON/123RF (TIGER)

♥ Droning on for tigers

The West Bengal Forest Department is all set to put a drone in the air to track tigers and prevent encroachment in the Sunderbans Biosphere Reserve. Officials claim that the custom-designed (not to mention pricey) drone will come fitted with GPS and high-res cameras, and be able to scan an area of 15 to 20sqkm. Go, tigers!



TAKE YOUR HAIR EXPERT WITH YOU!

You're all set for your holiday, except you always have trouble fitting all those beauty staples into your bag. Making your task a little simpler are **Bblunt Minis**, the brand's travel-happy collection of hair-care products (for both sexes) that will keep your strands in check, whether it's on a long-haul trek or a relaxing weekend getaway! (from Bblunt stores across the country and online retail stores [see www.bblunt.com/wheretobuy]; from ₹100)



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you can do now



1



2



3



4



5

inside

- 1. UDVADA, Gujarat**
Discover the joys of home-made ice cream and fantastic Parsi food in this town
- 2. BHORAMDEO, Chhattisgarh**
Find simple stays, simple tribals and extraordinary experiences here
- 3. THANJAVUR, Tamil Nadu**
Replete with arts and culture, Thanjavur's charms are worthy of immersing yourself in
- 4. MADLA, Madhya Pradesh**
Go now to get the forest all to yourself at Panna National Park
- 5. KOCHI, Kerala**
Explore the idyllic village of Kumbalangi, learn about local arts, or just lounge in your jammies all weekend at a cosy homestay



Parsi food in Udvada, Gujarat

JAMVA CHALOJI

It's a delicious piece of folklore. When the Zoroastrians fled Persia and came to Indian shores, they approached King Jadhav Rana seeking asylum. Unconvinced at first, Rana called out for a vessel of milk filled to the brim to symbolise his already abundant kingdom. A Parsi priest then dissolved some sugar into the milk without causing it to overflow, signifying that they would blend in and merely add some sweetness.

While this story can hardly be authenticated, here's what can. Udvada is the perfect place to sample both popular Parsi dishes and homely favourites, and the meals are still mostly cooked on a *chulavati*, a wood-fuelled hearth.

A coastal town 200-odd kilometres north of Mumbai, Udvada's main draw is its Iran Shah Atash Behram, which bears the sacred fire that has been burning for over a thousand years. Of course, it's also a worthy food pilgrimage. The eating spree begins right on the highway with an eggy breakfast at *Ahura* (see *Where to Eat* for all details). The *poro*, a *masala* omelette with a gentle ginger and garlic kick (₹ 70), is tasty as is the *akuri*, a Parsi-style *bhurji* (₹ 80), but don't miss the *sali par eedu*, fried eggs over a bed of potato straws (₹ 100).

Above: Udvada's residents can be spotted relaxing on their porches every evening

Below: No meal is complete without a bottle of Santa



This should tide you over until lunch, which you should definitely do at *Globe Hotel*. It does a mean mutton *pulao dar*, fragrant rice with tender meat served with creamy *dhansak dal* (₹ 500 for a set meal for non-guests). The menu changes daily but no lunch is complete without fried *boi* (white mullet) and a bottle of Santa raspberry, a local beverage that's practically impossible to find anywhere else. Hail a rickshaw after lunch because, each afternoon, the town's autowallahs double up as ice cream vendors, hawking hand-churned mango and *sitaphal* ice cream (₹ 20) from the vehicle's backseat.

There isn't much else to do in Udvada – and its charm is exactly that. When you're



GREAT FROM

Mumbai, Daman, Vapi

GREAT FOR

Lovers of food and seekers of quiet

GO NOW

While the weather's pleasant.

not feasting, nap, wander its quaint streets, admire the architecture and find a rocky perch over the beach to take in the theatrical sunset.

Then get right back to eating. Knock on the door at [Dastoor Baug Dharamsala](#) (but notify owner Perviz Rabadi in advance

that you'll be coming to dinner). As far as eating in Udvada goes, her offerings of burgers and pizzas are practically *avant-garde*. But skip those for her great value meals (₹ 300, you can suggest two mains). Her steamed basa in a coriander chutney resembles the popular *patra ni macchi* (minus the banana leaf) and is divine. Do ask for her *lagan nu custard* (₹ 40/ piece).

Sleepy Udvada goes to bed early and wakes up late, and the lazy mornings are made that much sweeter with *doodh na puff*, a glass of milk froth with nutmeg. Have your hotel arrange a tray of several (about ₹ 15/ glass) and a local resident will deliver it to your door in the morning.

Opt for an à la carte breakfast

1. The best local souvenirs you can bring back from this trip are *khari* and butter biscuits
2 & 5. Make Ahura dhaba on the highway your first pit stop and gorge on the *sali par eedu* for breakfast

3. The delicious *doodh na puff* is worth the calories

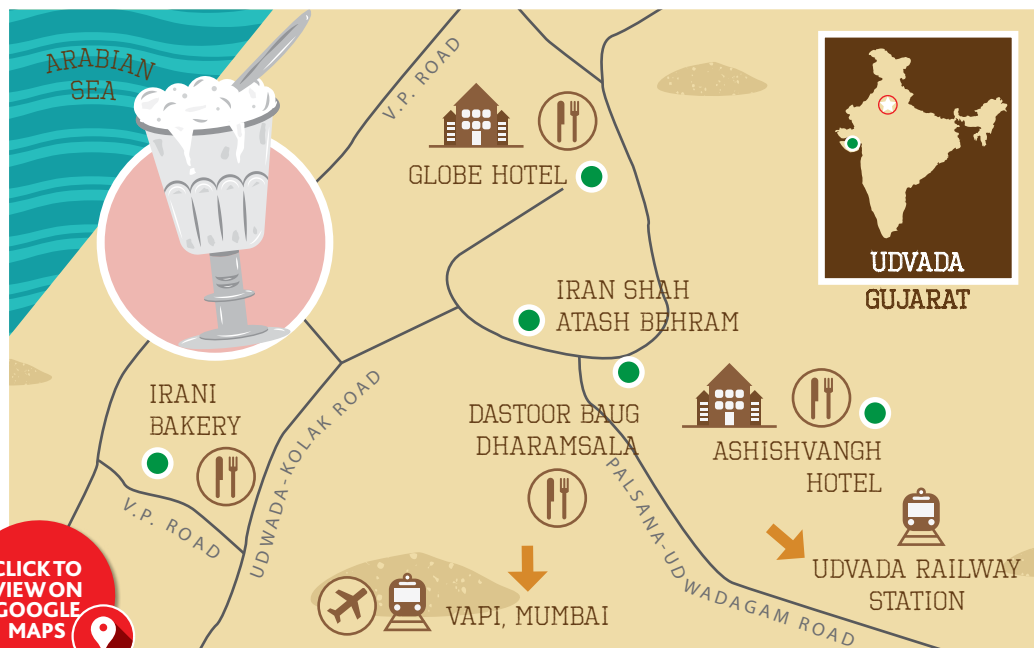
4. The Iran Shah Atash Behram is the most sacred of Parsi fire temples in India

at [Ashishvagh Hotel](#), likely the prettiest restaurant in town, strewn with gorgeous antiques that you can buy. Each morning it makes *kheema* or *khurchan*, a mix of goat organs (both ₹ 100), and either *sev*, sweet vermicelli topped with cashews and raisins, or *ravo*, semolina pudding (both ₹ 70).

Your last pit stop must be [Parsi da Dhaba](#), especially if you've packed an adventurous palate and clothes with an elastic waistband. The *kheema ghotala*, curried mince with egg (₹ 180), and *kaleji papeto*, chicken liver with potatoes (₹ 130) are a fitting end to the Parsi feast.

WORDS SHEENA DABHOLKAR

PHOTOGRAPHS SAMEER MANGTANI

**FACT SHEET****GETTING THERE**

Closest metro: Mumbai (190km)

Closest airport: Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport (177km) is well connected to Indian metros.

Closest railhead: Udvada Railway Station (UVD; 7.2km). Take the 19011 Gujarat Express there (leaves Mumbai Central [BCT] 5.45am, arrives UVD 8.54am; ₹ 310 AC Chair Car) and return via

the 19012 Gujarat Express (departs UVD 12.44pm, arrives BCT 4.25pm; ₹ 310 AC Chair Car).

GETTING AROUND

Everything in Udvada is within walking distance. Rickshaws are available from the station and run at reasonable, fixed fares, but, to avail of the highway's gems, you'll need your own transport. We used and liked the services of **Anfa Travels** (Laeeq: 00-91-9821352189; from ₹ 2,900/ day for an AC sedan).



and sandalwood also stocks *dhansak masala*, chutneys and pickles (9am – 5pm; *masalas* from ₹ 90).

WHAT TO PACK

An appetite, clothing in light fabrics (to deal with the humidity), antacids and mosquito repellent

CLEAN LOO GUIDE

On the highway, the loo at **Ahura** is well maintained.

SAFETY

Udvada is small, safe and slightly conservative. Dress modestly.

MEDICAL AID

Seth Damanwala Charitable Dispensary has a resident doctor in the case of emergencies (00-91-9099790259; Dr DN Rd, Udvada).

GOOD TO KNOW

- * Although the fixed lunches might seem pricey, the quantities are generally good enough to feed two.
- * Call restaurants in advance, especially if you're visiting in a group; couples usually don't need to book.
- * The **Zoroastrian Information Centre** is interesting enough to pay a visit to, full of tidbits about the Parsi community, its history, culture, customs and traditions (9am – 5pm Wed – Mon; free).
- * The *agiary* is off-limits to non-Zoroastrians.

WHERE TO STAY

Globe Hotel: Its 25 rooms are simply decorated but comfortable, offering all the mod cons, and generous breakfasts that can be enjoyed in bed (00-91-260-2345243, 00-91-98799 33550; <http://globehotel.in>; next to Pak Aderan; from ₹ 4,800 with all meals).

Ashishvagh Hotel: Well suited for families, the rooms sleep four and the hotel's courtyard has a badminton court and playground (00-91-260-2345700; behind Dastoor Baug Dharamsala; from ₹ 4,000 for an AC room with all meals).

WHERE TO EAT

Ahura: 00-91-9766512512; <http://ahurahotel.com>; after Charoti toll on NH 8, Amboli; open all day
Globe Hotel: see Where to Stay; 12pm – 2.30pm, 8pm – 10pm
Ashishvagh Hotel: see Where to Stay; 8.30am – 10.30am, 12.30pm – 2.30pm, 8.30pm – 10.30pm
Dastoor Baug Dharamsala: 00-91-

9699957374; near Pak Iranshah; 9am – 9pm, certain meals by appointment
Parsi da Dhaba: 00-91-8806279379; <http://parsidadhaba.com>; next to Dairyland, NH 8; 7am – 11pm

SHOPPING

Do all your shopping in the morning – it's the best time to visit the bakeries, as the goods are still warm from the oven. Get crumbly *nankhatais* (₹ 200/ kg) from **Irani Bakery** (00-91-260-245343; 8am – 8pm), and cumin-flecked *khari* (₹ 200/ kg) and a bag of *bhakras*, Parsi doughnuts (₹ 50), from the **Bharat Bakery** handcart parked outside the Iran Shah (00-91-9723149179; opp Pak Iran Shah; 8.30am – 1pm). You'll also find local women in the vicinity selling green garlic-spiked sago wafers known as *sarias*, and lemongrass and peppermint with which to infuse your *chai* like the Parsis do. A verandah shop selling religious wares

Above: A sculpture at the Zoroastrian Information Centre (see *Good to Know*)
 Below: Home-made ice cream at Dastoor Baug Dharamsala



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Bhoramdeo, Kawardha, Chhattisgarh

SUNNY DAYS

You've probably never heard of this place. In fact, chances are that you don't know much about Chhattisgarh, the state it's located in, either. So why *should* you be considering this unknown little destination for your next break? Because the reasons to visit are aplenty – the **Bhoramdeo Temple**, also known as the Khajuraho of Chhattisgarh, with its lotus-filled *pushpa sarovar* (lake), for one, makes a persuasive argument. Sure, if you've visited the real thing, you'll find that sobriquet a bit of a stretch, but the 11th-century architecture with its erotic imagery is undoubtedly reminiscent of what you'll see at the original.

Leisurely walks through the sal forests of the surrounding **Maikal Hills** is another. But perhaps the most compelling reason is the opportunity to get a close peek into the lives of the charming tribals of Chhattisgarh.

The perfect base from which to explore all this is the **Bhoramdeo Jungle Retreat** (133km from Raipur; see *Where to Stay*), a delightful little place oozing rustic appeal. Don't let the name fool you though. In spite of being designated a wildlife sanctuary, wildlife shouldn't really be at the top of your agenda here. Instead, spending a day or two in the wood-and-mud cottages, each with a nice little verandah, and chatting

A leisurely walk through sal forests is the best way to start your day

with Satyendra Upadhyay, aka Sunny, the ebullient owner of this place, should be on your agenda. The land and its produce are revered here, as they are across the state, so the traditional greeting *thali* is adorned with an assortment of fruits and veggies, rather than the usual paraphernalia. While basic comforts are in place at the resort, don't expect to catch up on your daily soap, or browse the internet, or use your phone, for that matter. So, like it or not, you'll have left the madding city far behind.

Sunny was born and raised in these parts, and he has a good rapport with the locals, which is great, because the usually reticent tribals are more than willing to pose for pictures and even throw their



GREAT FROM

Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai, Nagpur, Raipur

GREAT FOR

Meeting some of the oldest tribes in India

GO NOW

To see the land painted green.

homes open to his guests. Take a peek into their lives with a visit to a local market, or *haat*. Every village has a designated day of the week to play host, so that day is like a mini festival. Apart from the mindboggling variety of wares on sale, the markets are

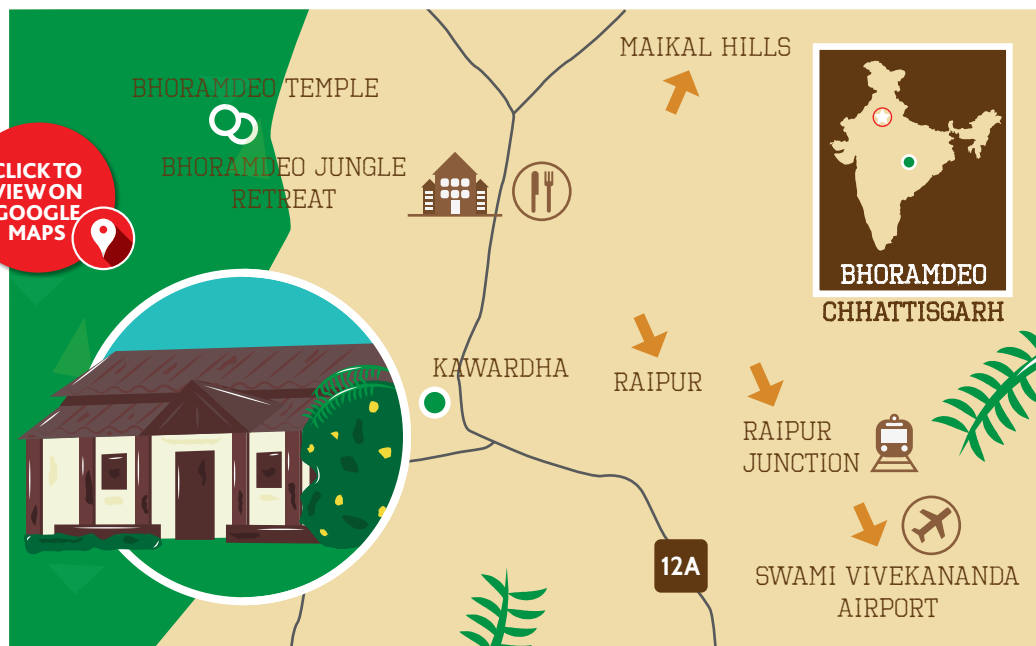
a non-intrusive way of observing these fascinating people. Though the one at **Taregaon** (*every Fri*) comes recommended, it's 42km away, and not really that much different from the one near Bhoramdeo. **Thuapani**, a small hamlet on the way to Chilpi, is also worth a visit, especially if you get to see Bakhru Baiga, the village shaman, practise his craft. Baiga denotes which tribe he's from. This part of the state is mostly inhabited by the Baigas, distinguished by the tattoos on their face. But the one thing that is common to all the tribals across the state – be it Gonds, Baigas or Bhatras – is the innocence in their eyes. While utterly endearing, it isn't the ideal quality to have if you're looking

1. The cottages at the Bhoramdeo Jungle Retreat are built from wood and mud
2. The morning mist adds to the charm of the pushpa sarovar
3. The tribals of Chhattisgarh are possibly its greatest treasure
4. Dhokra tribal art figurines are a collector's delight
5. The Bhoramdeo Temple with Khajuraho-esque carvings

to get ahead in the world. For his part, Sunny does what he can to better their lot. So, whenever he takes his guests over to see a traditional dance, he makes sure they are remunerated in kind like buying new outfits for their ensemble, a new set of vessels for social gatherings, or even aiding with the down payment for an LCV.

This is one opportunity you should make the most of. With the winds of change sweeping across the land, it won't be long before 'progress' comes a-knocking, and this innocent, eminently sustainable way of life is lost forever.

WORDS ANJUMAN DEODHAR
PHOTOGRAPHS VINOBHA NATHAN

**FACT SHEET****GETTING THERE**

Closest metro: Kolkata (948km via NH 6)

Closest city: Raipur (133km)

Closest airport: Raipur International Airport (150km). Indigo flies non-stop from Kolkata and New Delhi to Raipur (return fares from ₹ 6,225). Jet Airways and Air India fly non-stop from Mumbai (return from ₹ 6,800). Bhoramdeo is a three-hour drive away. AC cabs charge from ₹ 4,000 for a transfer to Bhoramdeo Jungle Retreat. The resort can also arrange for a transfer.

Closest railhead: Raipur Junction (R; 133km).

Take the daily **12810 Howrah Mumbai Mail** (leaves Howrah Junction [HWH] 8.15pm, arrives R 9am; ₹ 1,165 Third AC), and return by the **12809 Howrah Mail** (leaves R 4.15pm, arrives HWH 5.50am, ₹ 1,165 Third AC).

GETTING AROUND

Since local transport is virtually non-existent, it's best to have a car at your disposal. **Bhoramdeo Jungle Retreat** can arrange one for you starting from ₹ 3,000 per day for an AC Innova.

**WHERE TO STAY****Bhoramdeo Jungle Retreat:**

This earthy mud-and-wood retreat is the personification of tranquillity. The ever-smiling proprietor, Sunny, is quick-witted, enjoying a great rapport with the locals, and can offer an unmatched glimpse into their lives (00-91-9425558230; www.bhoramdeojungleretreat.com, sunnybjr@rediffmail.com; PO Village Chaura; from ₹ 7,000 with all meals and activities like bird-watching, trekking, cycling, visit to tribal village and market, tribal folk dance and music).

**WHERE TO EAT****Bhoramdeo Jungle Retreat's**

resident cook, Narayan, whips up some delicious fare. It's usually a vegetarian spread for lunch and non-vegetarian for dinner. If you're a meat fanatic, you can ask for non-vegetarian for lunch as well, but you'll need to inform them in advance. *Mahua*, the local moonshine,

though, can be procured at much shorter notice.

**CLEAN LOO GUIDE**

Although the roads are surprisingly well maintained, you won't find a clean loo, or even a decent restaurant for that matter, all the way up to Kawardha. Keep a tissue roll and sanitiser handy.

**WHAT TO PACK**

Nights in Bhoramdeo get surprisingly chilly, so make sure you pack enough woollens. A sturdy

Above: Food at the retreat is simple home-cooked fare, but delicious

Below: The locals are a happy, friendly lot



pair of hiking shoes is also recommended for hikes in the forest.

**SHOPPING**

Sarafa Lane in Kawardha, 18km away, is lined with shops selling some really pretty silver jewellery, the kind you will see most tribal women wearing. The inscriptions on some of them, reminiscent of an Arabic script, make them great mantelpiece items.

**MEDICAL AID**

Bhoramdeo Jungle Retreat has a first aid kit, but, for emergencies, visit **Sai Sanjivani Hospital** (00-91-7741299200; Sarodha Lalpur Rd, Kawardha).

SAFETY

Even though it isn't teeming with wildlife, Bhoramdeo is still a wildlife sanctuary, so chance encounters cannot be ruled out. Avoid venturing out on foot after dark.

CHILD-FRIENDLINESS

This isn't a child-centric destination, and kids might not savour the experience.

GOOD TO KNOW

* Alcohol is big in these parts and the local brews, be they *mahua*, *sulfi*, or *landa*, are absolutely delicious (about ₹ 100/ bottle). And although you can be sure you won't get an adulterated lot, hygiene is still highly suspect.

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INDIA



Art and culture in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu

FADING GLORY

What do Lord Shiva, the Buddha, weapons of war and childbirth have in common? Absolutely nothing. But Thanjavur's **Brihadishwara Temple** throws them all together anyway.

Historians believe that this 11th-century Chola temple wasn't designed to be a shrine to the Destroyer of Worlds. Whispers abound that the master architect of the temple, King Rajaraja I, didn't have a single spiritual bone in his body. Which is why it's believed that the structure, with its 61m-tall *vimana* (tower), acted as a watchtower and weapons storage facility. Adding credibility to this theory are the rather arbitrary carvings of warriors

scattered around the complex, and one of a rather buxom woman giving birth atop one of the *gopuras*. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, the temple today sees thousands of devotees, all unaware of its bizarre origins. In awe, they offer prayers to the 3.6m-tall *shivling*, which could have just been the perfect smokescreen.

Thanjavur shone under the rule of the Cholas, before being taken over by the Nayaks and, in the 17th century, the Marathas. All of these dynasties played an important role in making Thanjavur the cultural epicentre of its time. It was during the Maratha rule that many of its arts found an outlet, thanks to Serfoji II, possibly the land's most beloved ruler.

Above: Bright, poppy colours and 22-carat gold (lots of it) are the distinguishing features of a Thanjavur painting

Below: While in Thanjavur, don't forget to indulge in a tummy-bursting South Indian meal

Sambaji Rajah Bhonsle, a direct descendant of Serfoji II, is perhaps the most humble royal you will encounter. He makes Tanjore paintings and resides in a neglected portion of the **Thanjavur Royal Palace Complex**, the family having bequeathed most of its land to the government. Step in and gasp as you take in the splashes of gold and red on wooden frames throughout the length of a cavernous corridor. A rotund Krishna peeks out at you, while a formidable Shiva strikes 108 Bharatanatyam poses.

Bhonsle is only keeping ancient art form alive, one he fears might soon die out. Making a Tanjore painting is no piece of cake. Tamarind seed paste





GREAT FROM

Chennai, Bangalore, Tiruchirappalli

GREAT FOR

Culture cultures

GO NOW

For a cool and rainy Thanjavur.

and limestone is applied, layer upon layer, onto a cloth base. Once this is dry, he draws divine beings, after which gems are inlaid to make a pattern. The detailing of form and face is followed by the laying of 22-carat gold foil. Herbal colours are then filled in to bring the image to life.

Explore the rest of the labyrinthine complex and you'll find that the Saraswati Mahal Library houses Serfoji II's collection of surgical equipment, palm-leaf paintings and manuscripts, while the Art Gallery is home to 10th-century bronze sculptures.

The **Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH)** organises a whistle-stop tour of the town on foot (₹ 1,000/ hour, but can be customised). Begin at **Christ Church**, better known as Schwartz's Church, built by Danish missionary CF Schwartz, Serfoji II's mentor, and move on to **Ponnaiah Nilayam**, a Bharatanatyam *gurukul* that has given us gifted danseuses such as Vyjayanthimala and Hema Malini. After a few more halts,

1. One tap and you can have Thanjavur's pretty bobbiehead dolls dancing to your tunes

2. M Narayanan's veena workshop is a testament to his labour of love

3. The maze-like Thanjavur Royal Palace Complex is a mixed bag of ruins and restored buildings

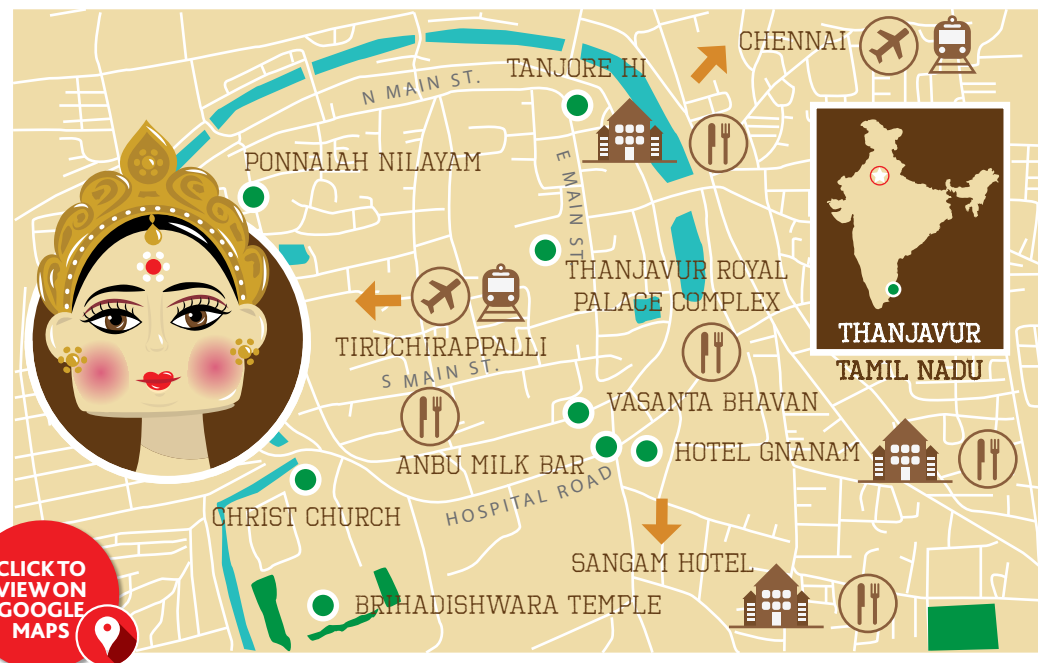
4. Lord Krishna is depicted quite frequently in Tanjore paintings

head to the south, where you can walk into a workshop run by M Narayanan, a fifth-generation veena maker, to watch how the ancient musical instrument is made.

If he likes you, he'll show the Ekantha veena, fashioned out of a single piece of wood, with intricate carvings inching across its entire wooden surface. Amid sounds of workers scraping away at veenas, he'll tell you that the once-illustrious profession is now on its last legs, much like all of Thanjavur's art forms. So, go to Thanjavur now, before the flaming torch of tradition dies out with its current keepers.

WORDS SHRADDHA UCHIL

PHOTOGRAPHS VINOBA NATHAN

**FACT SHEET****GETTING THERE**

Closest metro: Chennai (345km) is a little under eight hours away.

Closest airport: Tiruchirappalli International Airport (62km). Air India Express and Jet Airways fly non-stop from Chennai (return fares from ₹ 3,500).

Closest railhead: Thanjavur Junction (TJ; 2km). Take the daily **16853 Trichy Express** (leaves Chennai Central [MAS] 8.15am, arrives TJ 2.43pm; ₹ 600 Third AC) and return by the **16854 Chennai Express**

(leaves TJ 10.20am, arrives MAS 6pm; ₹ 600 Third AC).

GETTING AROUND

Autos are easily available in Thanjavur, but they tend to overcharge; negotiate a price before getting in. It's best to hire a car for the duration of your trip if you have a packed itinerary; the driver can also double up as a translator. We used and liked the services of **Travel Cart India** (00-91-9447169933; www.travelcartindia.com, mail@travelcartindia.com; ₹ 3,000/ day for an AC sedan).

**WHERE TO STAY**

Hotel Gnanam: Located in the heart of Thanjavur, this hotel is a stone's throw away from major landmarks. Choose from the Deluxe, Mini or Executive Suites (00-91-4362-278501; www.hotelgnanam.com, hotelgnanam@gmail.com; Anna Salai; from ₹ 2,600 with breakfast).

Sangam Hotel: This modern hotel comes with 54 swanky rooms, some of which offer lovely views of the Brihadishwara Temple (00-91-4362-239451; www.hotelsangam.com, bookings@hotelsangam.com; Trichy Rd, opp Vinothakan Hospital; from ₹ 4,200 with breakfast).

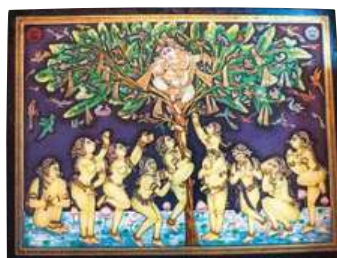
Tanjore Hi: This heritage boutique hotel is easily the city's prettiest address. The restored 1920s Colonial house merges the old with quirky elements like ceiling-to-floor collages on the walls (reservation:

00-91-413-2656351, property: 00-91-4362-252111; www.duneecogroup.com, booking@duneecogroup.com; 464, East Main St; from ₹ 5,500 with breakfast).

**WHERE TO EAT**

Head to **Vasanta Bhavan**, beside the Old Bus Stand, for a traditional South Indian breakfast. Its best-sellers are the masala *dosa* and the *ghee* roast (also a *dosa*). The eatery also features North Indian and 'Chindian' dinner favourites (00-91-4362-233266; 1338, South Rampart, Old Bus Stand; 6am – 11pm; dosas from ₹ 40). A short walk away is the legendary **Anbu Milk Bar**, a tiny stall with only four items on its menu. Come here in the morning for a glass of Bombay *lassi*, and return at night for the freshly-made palm sugar milk and *badam* milk, topped off with a dollop of cream (Old Bus Stand; 10am – 12am;

A Tanjore painting showing a mischievous Krishna stealing *gopis'* clothes and hanging them up on a tree



from ₹ 20). Hotel Gnanam's restaurant, **Sahana**, serves what is possibly the best South Indian meal in town. The *thali* comes with rice, *sambhar*, *vathal kuzhambu* (berry curry), *rasam*, *poriyal* (dry veggies) and *kootu* (gravy veggies), among a dozen other items. Come here for lunch (see *Where to Stay*; lunch: 12pm – 3.30pm; South Indian *thali*: ₹ 144).

**SHOPPING**

Poompuhar, run by the Tamil Nadu Government, sells handicrafts from Thanjavur and around. Pick up the region's popular *thalaiyatti bommai*, or bobblehead dolls (00-91-4362-230060; Railway Station Rd; from ₹ 350).

**CLEAN LOO GUIDE**

The drive from Tiruchirappalli takes about an hour; use the airport loo. While in Thanjavur, most of the hotels have clean loos and you don't need to be eating there to use them.

SAFETY

Thanjavur is a crowded town, so it's fairly safe to be out and about until nightfall.

**MEDICAL AID**

As it's a fairly big town, Thanjavur has many hospitals. Head to the centrally located super-specialty **MVK Hospital** located within the moated quarter, in case of any emergency (00-91-4362-279999; www.mvkhospitals.com; 2771, South Rampart, opp Thilagar Thidal).

GOOD TO KNOW

*The heritage walk organised by **INTACH** is customisable. If you'd like to cover only the arts or the architecture of Thanjavur, inform Mr Muthukumar, secretary for INTACH's Thanjavur chapter, in advance, and it will be arranged (00-91-9842455765). Mr Muthukumar might not always be available to take you on a heritage walk, but equally good is Mr S Renga Rajan, a teacher who doubles as a tour guide. He speaks both Tamil and English fluently (00-91-9443186230; ₹ 1,500 for the day). ***Sambaji Rajah Bhonsle** takes custom orders for his Tanjore paintings and ships them across India (00-91-9443602333; No 18, Palace Kalyana Mahal; from ₹ 3,000).

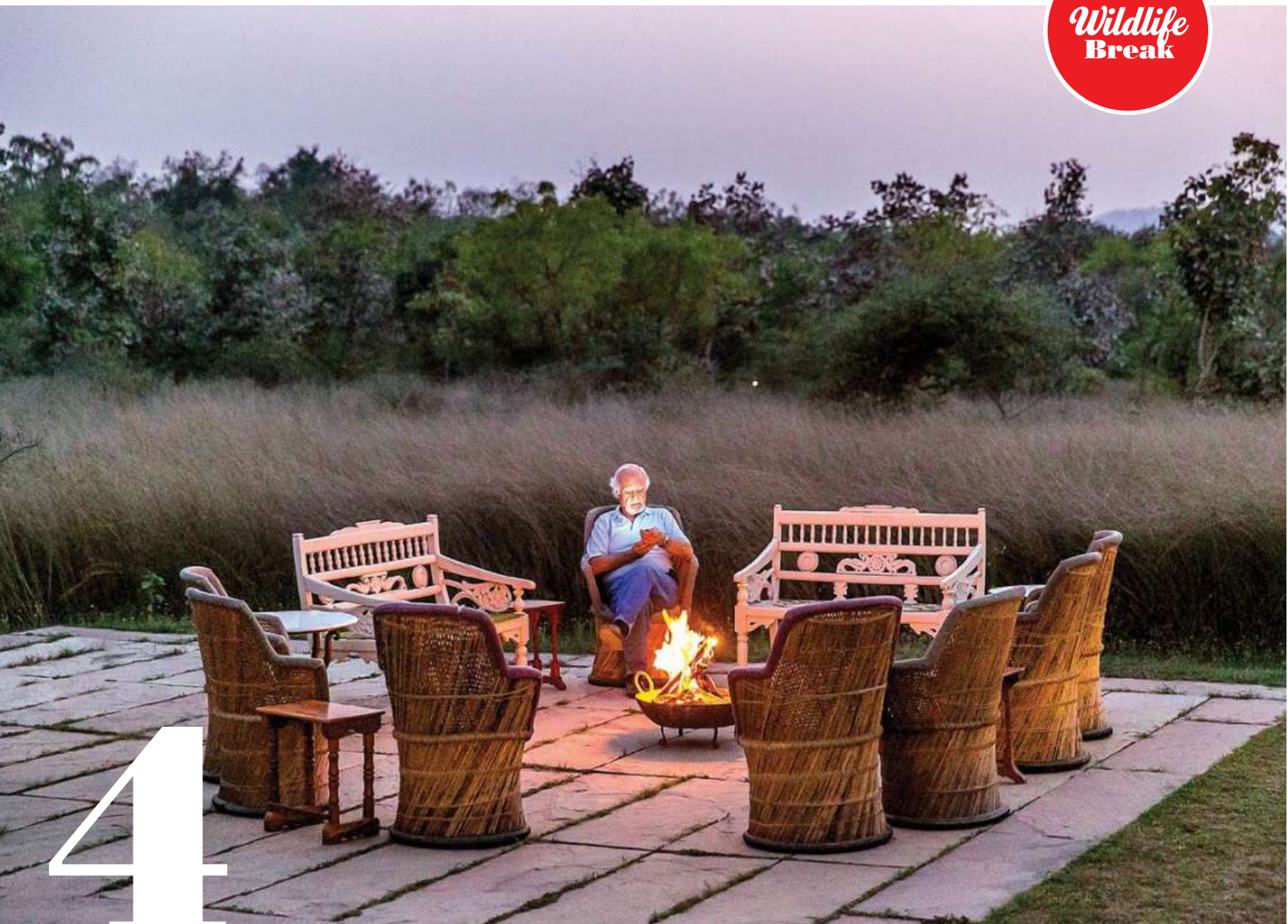
SOMETIMES, A CAMERA ONLY COMES IN THE WAY.



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The Sarai at Toria, Madla, Madhya Pradesh

WHEN NATURE BECKONS

It's quite a spectacular setting – a romantic boat ride on the peaceful Ken River with a view of lush greenery as far as the eye can see, backed by the most glorious sunsets nature can conjure. All this is yours to enjoy amid the serenity that only an unspoilt countryside can offer. If you're very lucky, you might spot a gharial passing by stealthily, or a water snake popping its head out for the briefest of moments.

A great place to bed down at while you play the waiting game is The Sarai at Toria, which is wonderfully quaint and secluded. A quiet retreat, it's tucked into a little nook on the banks of the river

and is the perfect base from which to explore Panna National Park and the heritage sites of Khajuraho. Spread over nine acres, its eight mud cottages, designed by architect Eugene Pandala, were inspired by local village dwellings. Beautifully decorated, these spacious cottages offer every comfort you could want, including attached verandahs from which to enjoy the quietude.

Meals here are an absolute treat, as much for the delicious home-cooked recipes as for the settings in which you relish them. The open porch, which doubles as a common area, is perfect for tasty breakfast treats to be had

The Sarai at Toria is a wonderful base for your wildlife explorations into Panna National Park

on while enjoying the morning sun, lunches can be relished in the cool shade of a ficus tree, evening tea or drinks can be sipped by the dancing flames of a bonfire and dinner can be an utterly romantic candle-lit affair under a clear, starry sky. If you want to stretch your legs a little, ask the staff to take you on one of the nature walks around the property (*free*) or to a longer walk to the nearby village (*₹ 1,500/ upto four people*).

Or you could always head to the nearby **Panna National Park**, which is full of exciting prospects. Being caught up in intense staring with sambar and spotted deer, holding your breath while the clear calls of langurs, peacocks



GREAT FROM

Khajuraho, Bhopal, Kanpur

GREAT FOR

Peace and quiet; less touristy
wildlife spotting

GO NOW

To have the park all to yourself.

and nilgai ring out from the thick foliage or staying as still as you possibly can so as to not scare away a dancing peacock – the jungle is full of thrilling moments. Of course, if you're one of those lucky few, there are chances of catching a glimpse

of a big cat. But don't expect to see it all in one day. To truly enjoy the beauty of this place, you'll need to go on a few jeep safaris at the crack of dawn, but don't be grumpy; the morning safari comes with a scenic breakfast on the riverbank.

To get your culture fix, set out on an exploration of the UNESCO World Heritage site of **Khajuraho**, where the exquisite beauty of the temples will take your breath away (₹ 3,650 with transport in an AC Innova, entry fees extra, ₹ 1,150 for English-speaking guide for half a day). If you are looking for culture sans crowds, a trip to the little-visited **Ajaigarh** fort and temples will prove quite interesting (₹ 5,250 with picnic

1. The eco-friendly mud cottages are spacious and comfortable

2 & 5. The boat ride on the Ken River is a good time for birdwatching

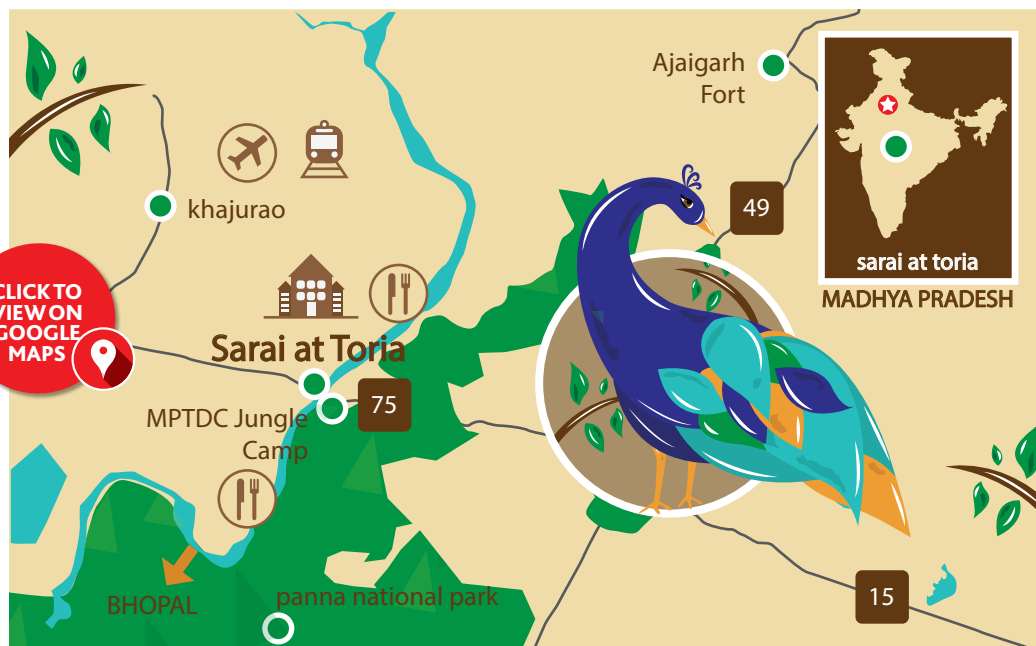
3. A safari in Panna National Park reveals sightings of nilgai grazing alongside herds of sambar

4. The home-cooked meals at The Sarai at Toria are a treat

lunch and transfers). The fort, believed to date back to at least the 12th century, sits on a hill 860ft above Ajaigarh town and requires quite a climb to get you to the summit. Within the fort premises, you can also explore the ruins of three intricately-carved temples, which are similar in style to those at Khajuraho. End your little expedition with a snack on the cliff with a stunning view of the valley below. It's a different world out there, one where you happily realise just how perfect a quiet escape to the jungles of Central India can be.

WORDS NADEZNA SIGANPORIA

PHOTOGRAPHS VAIBHAV MEHTA

**FACT SHEET****GETTING THERE**

Closest metro: New Delhi (662km)

Closest city: Khajuraho (23km), Bhopal (378km), Kanpur (245km)

Closest airport: Khajuraho Airport (22km).

Air India and Jet Airways fly to Khajuraho Airport with one stopover from New Delhi (return fares from ₹ 7,666).

Closest railhead: Khajuraho Railway Station (KURJ; 19km). From New Delhi, you can take the 12448 UP Sampark Kranti Express

(leaves Hazrat Nizamuddin [NZM] 8.10pm, arrives KURJ 6.35am; ₹ 955 Third AC) and return by the 22447 Khajuraho Nizamuddin Express (leaves KURJ 6.20pm, arrives NZM 5.25am; ₹ 955 Third AC). Jhansi Junction has more trains, but is farther away (182km).

GETTING AROUND

The property can arrange for a pick-up from Khajuraho Airport or the railway station. We used the services of **Rai Travels** (00-91-9893054246, 00-91-755-2749456; ₹ 2,600/ day for AC Indica).

**WHERE TO STAY**

The Sarai at Toria: With eight spacious, pretty cottages located on the banks of the Ken River, The Sarai at Toria makes for a wonderfully quiet getaway in the heart of Madhya Pradesh's countryside (reservations: 00-91-124-2356004; property: 00-91-9752270337 [Joanna], 00-91-9685293130 [Raghu]; www.saraiattoria.com, saraiattoria@gmail.com; Mela Wali Gali, Toria Village, Chhatarpur District; from ₹ 16,600, with all meals and on-site activities, jeep safari from ₹ 6,640/ one to two people).

**WHERE TO EAT**

The Sarai at Toria serves delicious set meals with a variety of Indian dishes (breakfast: 8am – 10.30am, lunch: 1pm – 2.30pm, dinner: 8pm – 9.30pm, timings flexible). The **MPTDC Jungle Camp**, next to the Panna National Park entrance, has a limited but tasty multi-cuisine menu on offer (00-91-

7732-275275, 00-91-9827749975; NH 75, near the Panna National Park entry gate, Madla; 8am – 10am, 12pm – 3pm, 7pm – 10.30pm; mains from ₹ 85).

WHAT TO PACK

Comfortable walking shoes, neutral colours for the safari, warm jacket if visiting post November

**CLEAN LOO GUIDE**

Hotel Shelter Inn makes for a good loo and refreshment stop on the drive from Jhansi (00-91-7682-241664; www.hotelshelterinn.com; near the bus stand, Jhansi Rd, Chhatarpur; restaurant timings: 11am – 11pm).

**MEDICAL AID**

The property has

1. Lunches at the property are best enjoyed under the shade of a ficus tree
2. The Ken River will make you want to laze on a rubber tube of your own



a first-aid kit. **The District Civil Hospital** (22km from the property) is the closest hospital for medical emergencies (00-91-7732-252055; Police Line Rd, Irrigation Colony, Panna).

CHILD-FRIENDLINESS

Kids might enjoy the boat ride on Ken River and the jeep safaris in Panna National Park. Within the property, there isn't much to do other than laze around and enjoy the peace.

GOOD TO KNOW

- * **Panna National Park:** 00-91-7732-252135; counter: 5.30am – 8.30am, 1pm – 4.30pm, park: 6.30am – 10am and 3pm – 6.30pm entry: ₹ 1,320/ six people, jeep: ₹ 2,000, guide: ₹ 300
- * The park is closed from July 1 to October 15.



3 DAYS BECOME A WEEK. A WEEK BECOMES A MONTH.



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Gramam Homestay, Kumbalangi, Kochi, Kerala

GOLDEN SUNSETS

With a skip, a twirl and a grunt, he throws his net into the water with the grace of a ballet dancer performing a pirouette. The net unfurls mid-air, glides softly to the surface of the water and then disappears. A few moments later, it is hauled out of the water and you're looking down at a very snappy crab. Turn around and you'll see someone scurrying up a coconut tree; a few quick hacks and it's raining fresh coconuts.

A visit to the little hamlet of **Kallanchery** is full of interesting experiences (*10-minute boat ride from the homestay*). From the moment you step off

the wooden boat, you're thrown into all kinds of fascinating local arts, from the process of coir-making to hand-weaving coconut leaves to make thatched roofs. If it all feels a little rehearsed, it's because it probably is, but that doesn't make the experience any less appealing. Your guide will take you around the crab farm, regale you with tidbits of information and introduce you to the locals who are all more than happy to give you a demonstration of this or that.

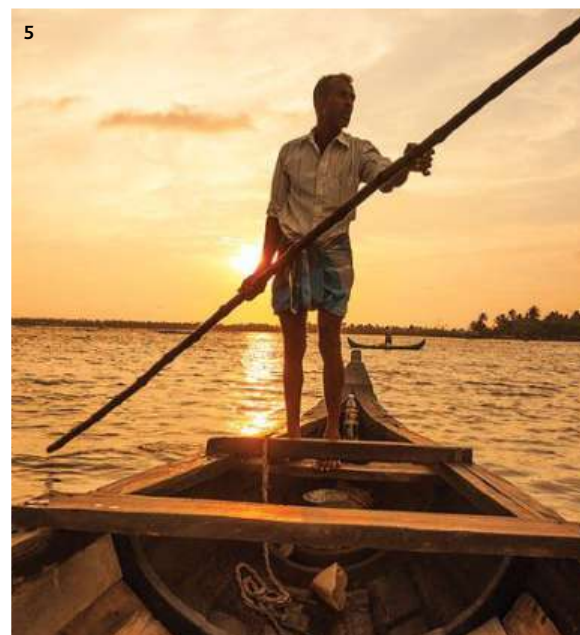
When you finally sit down to a delicious lunch packed with local favourites like

Above: A great place to unwind, the patio of the Backwater Cottage affords spectacular views

Below: A visit to the nearby prawn farm ends with a sampling of freshly-caught Kerala-style prawns

masala prawns à la Kerala and fish *moilee*, the view is quite spectacular. You're looking out at rows of gigantic Chinese fishing nets hovering above the glistening backwaters. This excursion (see *Good to Know*) is just one of the many things you can do while staying at Gramam Homestay, a tranquil property in the quiet village of Kumbalangi that sits on a three-acre waterfront property overlooking the backwaters. Walk past the main house and the view really opens up; a wonderfully-restored old coconut farm house, which is now the Backwater Cottage,





GREAT FROM

Bangalore

GREAT FOR

Waterfront R&R

GO NOW

To experience the quiet side of Kochi.

sits pretty surrounded by greenery and a patio perfect for enjoying golden sunsets.

Peek inside the spacious cottage and you'll find a smattering of classic rich-toned furniture, a few vintage curios and a pebble-floored open-air bathroom.

Don't linger in your cottage too long, though, because a sunset boat ride in a traditional canoe awaits (see *Good to Know*). The hour-long ride, which begins literally a few steps from your room, is a great way to watch the sunset; if you like the views from land, you'll be enthralled by the sweeping views of the small islands off the Malabar Coast. Later, head to a prawn farm, about 2km away (see *Good to Know*). Large expanses of what used to be paddy fields have now been converted into a working prawn farm, portions of which you can access via very wobbly but quick boat rides.

1. The large cottage with an attached kitchen is perfect for family getaways too

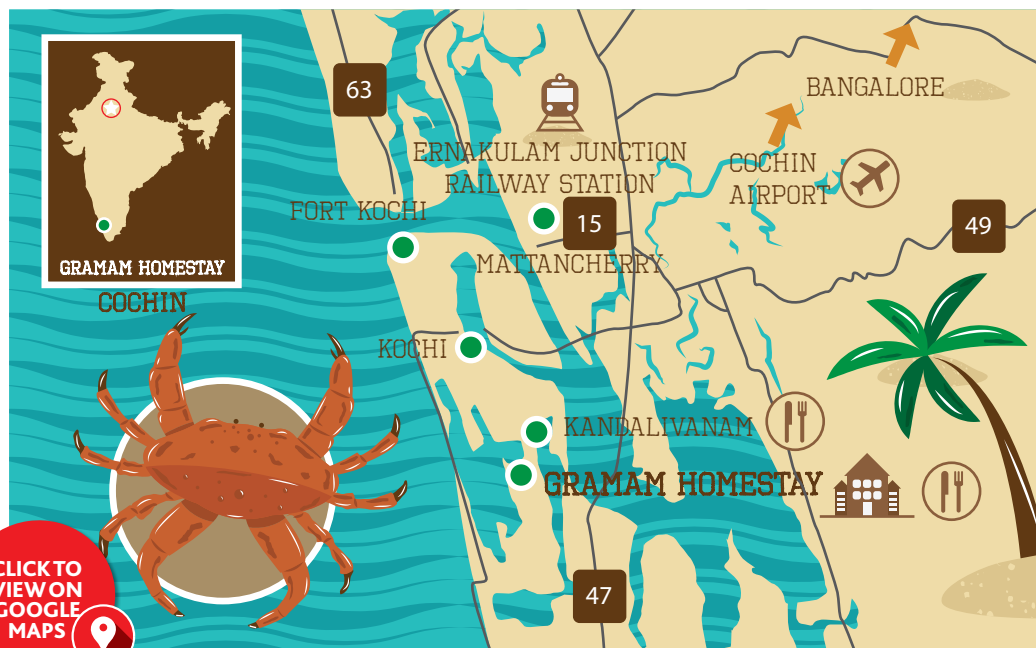
2. The open-air bathroom is a treat in itself

3 & 4. From coir-making to cast-net fishing, a visit to Kallancherry Village is full of interesting experiences

5. No visit to Kerala is complete without the quintessential boat ride on the backwaters

While you'll be perfectly content with barely moving out of Kumbalangi, spend the next day strolling the packed alleyways of Jew Town, famous for its spice shops and art galleries. Barely 10km from the homestay, the beautiful heritage areas of **Fort Kochi** and **Mattancherry**, with their mix of Jewish, Portuguese, Dutch and British influences, ooze that wonderful old-world charm that you won't want to miss. Linger, but not too long – that golden sunset awaits!

WORDS NADEZNA SIGANPORIA
PHOTOGRAPHS VINOBHA NATHAN

**FACT SHEET****GETTING THERE**

Closest metro: Bangalore (554km)

Closest city: Kochi (5km)

Closest airport: Cochin International Airport (47km). AirAsia, Jet Airways, Air India, SpiceJet and IndiGo fly to Kochi from Bangalore (return fares from ₹ 2,900).

Closest railhead: Ernakulam Junction (ERS; 12km). Take the 16315 Kochuveli Express (leaves Bangalore City Junction [SBC] 5.15pm,

arrives ERS 4.30am; ₹ 935 Third AC) and return by the daily 16316 Bangalore Express (leaves ERS 8.30pm, arrives SBC 8.35am; ₹ 935 Third AC).

GETTING AROUND

The property can arrange transfers from the airport (from ₹ 1,500/ one-way) and railway station (from ₹ 500/ one-way). We used and liked the services of Travel Cart India (00-91-484-2663533; www.travelcartindia.com, mail@travelcartindia.com; from ₹ 2,000/ day for an AC car).

**WHERE TO STAY****Gramam Homestay:**

Located in a quiet little corner of Kumbalangi village, this property offers one detached cottage and one room within the main structure. The Backwater Cottage, right on the waterfront, sleeps four and is very comfortable with a semi-open bathroom and attached kitchen. Windows open out on to peaceful views of the backwaters and the famous Chinese fishing nets in the distance (00-91-484-2240278, 00-91-9447177312; www.gramamhomestay.com, jos@gramamhomestay.com; Neduvelli House, North Kumbalangi; Garden Room: ₹ 3,500 with breakfast, Backwater Cottage: ₹ 6,000 with breakfast).

**WHERE TO EAT**

Meals served on the property are local Kerala delights (₹ 450/ meal/ person; lunch is not served). At a walking distance from the homestay,

the Kadalivanam restaurant at Heritage Methanam is great for a quick lunch. The menu includes a few local dishes like Kerala beef fry (₹ 140) with parotta (₹ 20) and karimeen curry (price depends on the size of the fish) along with a continental selection (00-91-484-2248284; www.heritagemethanam.com; Kumbalangi-Perumpadappu Rd; 8am – 11.30am, 12pm – 10.30pm).

**CLEAN LOO GUIDE**

The property is only a 90-minute drive from the airport, which has decent loo facilities.

**WHAT TO PACK**

Mosquito repellent and sunscreen

**MEDICAL AID**

The homestay has a doctor on-call. For emergencies, head to Fatima Hospital (00-91-484-2238843/ 45; www.fatimahospital.in; Perumpadappu, Kochi).

1 & 2. Spend the evening relaxing by the water, great for some bird- and people-watching

**CHILD-FRIENDLINESS**

The property will keep the kiddies occupied with its activities.

GOOD TO KNOW

* Activities organised by the homestay include yoga sessions within the property (₹ 500/ person/ hour); a sunset boat ride (₹ 500/ person); a village visit to Kallanchery (₹ 2,000/ with transfer by country boat, local activities like a visit to a crab farm, coir-making, weaving with coconut leaves and lunch/ dinner); and a visit to a prawn farm (₹ 1,000/ person with transfers by tuk-tuk, fishing and dinner with a local family).

Features

Pg 66 Make like the early explorers and journey on the Lunatic Express across **Kenya** | **Pg 80** Live the fairytale life in snow-clad **Switzerland**
Pg 92 Foodie Mauritius, Madagascar for its animals... which is the **Indian Ocean island** for you? | **Pg 104** Step into a world of the bizarre and the wonderful in **Japan** | **Pg 118** Make your way to the northeast, and discover a **Sikkim** transformed by the winter



Travelling through
Switzerland in the winter,
pg 80

PHOTOGRAPH: JYOTHY KARAT



Legends *of the Lunatic Express*

Take a trip on Kenya's pioneering railway line and discover the stories behind the first safari expeditions – from hair-raising animal encounters to luxurious camps in the wilderness

WORDS OLIVER SMITH PHOTOGRAPHS PHILIP LEE HARVEY

A common sight across Kenyan game parks, an African elephant journeys through the swamps, grasslands and acacia trees of Amboseli National Park



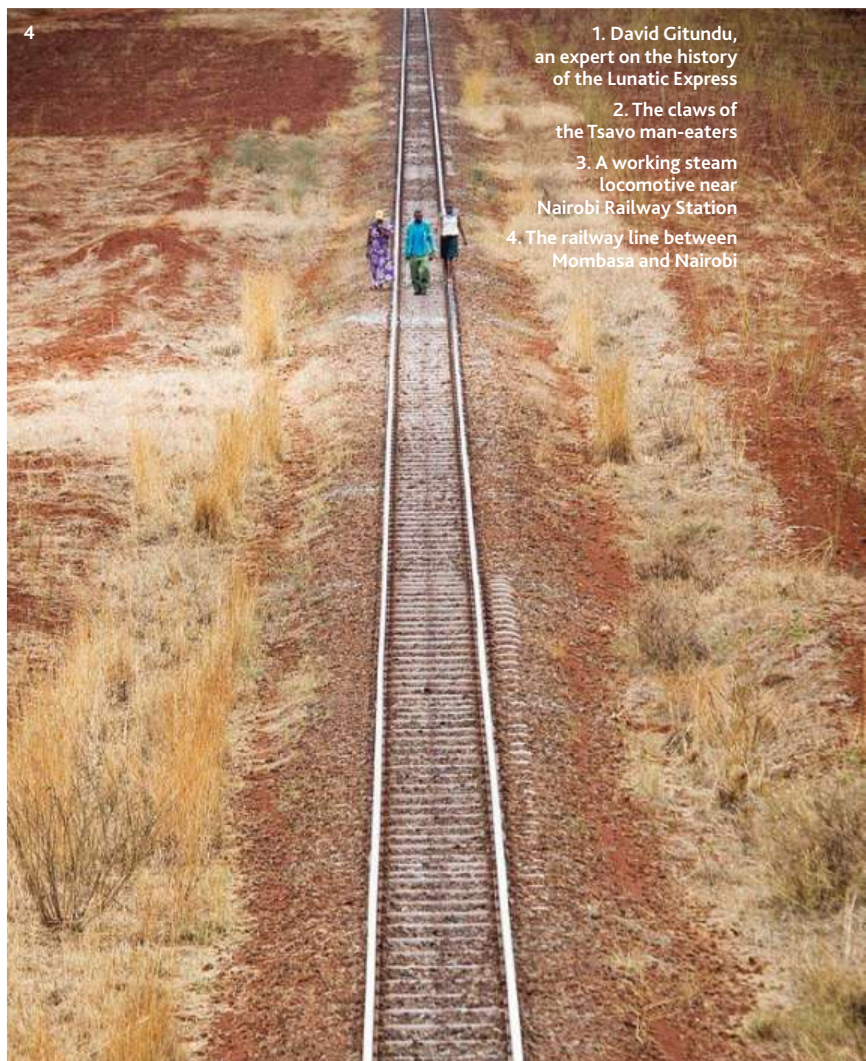
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1. David Gitundu, an expert on the history of the Lunatic Express
2. The claws of the Tsavo man-eaters
3. A working steam locomotive near Nairobi Railway Station
4. The railway line between Mombasa and Nairobi

A solitary lion walks into the early morning wind in the Cottar's Concession, on the edge of the Maasai Mara National Reserve



IT is bedtime in Mombasa, and the trade winds from the Indian Ocean draw a thick quilt of cloud over the sleeping town.

At Mombasa station, however, the overnight train to Nairobi is already several hours late.

On the platform, a solitary busker sings songs from *The Lion King* to bored passengers and a cat snoozes under a stack of luggage. The stationmaster checks the time as he sips on a cup of milky tea, but anyone could be forgiven for supposing he is waiting for a train that departed decades ago. All around us are bare timetable boards and iron rails swallowed up by long grass.

Then something stirs – from the gloom ahead comes a rasping whistle that startles the cat, drowns out *Hakunah matata* and causes the stationmaster to splutter his tea.

Rattling out from the darkness comes the train from Nairobi, a legendary service known to some as the Kenya–Uganda Railway, to others as the Iron Snake, but, most famously, as the Lunatic Express.

Now part of Kenya's railway network, it was this line that helped create our modern concept of safari, a means for wealthy Westerners to be whisked away from the African coast and into the continent's interior. Opened in 1901, the Lunatic Express earned its nickname carrying a cast of swaggering aristocrats, scoundrels and hunters of suicidal daring – a generation to whom the railway was a ticket to a land of infinite adventure.

Though the history of the line is intertwined with the ugliness of colonial exploitation and the bygone era of big-game hunting, passengers on the Lunatic

Express sought the same kicks that safari-goers in Kenya look to experience today. They craved Africa's wide-open spaces – the adrenaline rush of a land where human beings are still part of the food chain.

"You can see why they called it the Lunatic Express," says John the stationmaster, sipping on a second cup of tea. "If they came all the way from Europe to build this railway through the bush, they must have been mad!"

The construction of the line was celebrated as a feat of daredevil engineering by Kenya's British colonists. Rhinos charged the locomotives and giraffes chewed on the telegraph lines. A century on – with much of the dense bush that the line once traversed now tamed – a sense of the wildness of the Lunatic Express survives. Leaning out of the window can still mean →



being rewarded with a mouthful of tropical foliage. And animals still periodically blockade the track, leaving the driver little choice but to stop the train, get out and chase them off with a big stick.

Finally, our train heaves out of the station and past the creeks of Mombasa Island, belching out plumes of thick smoke as we swoop around shanty towns where corrugated iron roofs glisten in the rain, and past ditches where frogs croak in the darkness. Carriages beat out chaotic time signatures as we jolt over the rails – a medley of slamming doors and creaking joints.

The bumpier stages of the line can induce a mild seasickness – in the early days of the Lunatic Express, passengers were advised to remove their false teeth before travelling. No such announcement is made on the train today, but some old-world pomp lingers. Passengers travelling first-class are politely summoned into a dining car, where a portrait of the Kenyan president

‘A century ago, a pair of man-eating lions stalked in the darkness outside my cabin window’

grins down at white linen-covered tables, while attendants shuffle dutifully about the corridors, dispensing blankets stamped with faded Kenya Railways logos.

The glow of Mombasa fades into the night behind us as our train clatters past derelict signal boxes and a decaying station lit by the feeble light of a paraffin lamp. Eventually we approach the bridge that crosses the Tsavo River – the site of the

grisliest chapter in the construction of the railway. A century ago, a pair of man-eating lions stalked in the darkness outside my cabin window – snatching construction workers sleeping in their tents, claiming as many as 100 victims in just a few months.

The wind whips ominously about the cabin windows as I peer into the gloom outside, but nothing stirs. The stuffed remains of the Tsavo man-eaters, which were eventually tracked down and killed, now growl at school parties in a Chicago museum. Yet theirs weren't to be the last instances of lion attack on the Lunatic Express. A few years later, a British hunter turned pest control vigilante named Charles Ryall set out to exterminate the ‘Kima Killer’ – a lion that had been scaling station rooftops to swipe at the humans inside. Lying in wait in a railway carriage, Ryall dozed off with his rifle on his lap – only for the lion to climb on board the carriage and maul the slumbering hunter to death. →

A herd of elephants stomps about in the sunset in the Cottar's Concession – an undulating stretch of land on the edge of the Maasai Mara

A yellow baboon – a primate species
that is widespread across the African
savannah – tending to her young





Ryall's remains were buried at a railway depot named Nairobi, now Kenya's capital, where trainspotter David Gitundu is one of few visitors to his grave.

"The tribes who lived in this region didn't like the railway being built through their land," he explains after we arrive in Nairobi the following morning. "They believed that man-eating lions were possessed by the spirits of their ancestors – and they were returning to destroy the Iron Snake."

Born in the yard of Nairobi Railway Station, David spent his childhood climbing trackside trees to get a better view of the engines; now, he sits on the platform selling postcards of steam engines to curious passengers. He grumbles about the state of the line today – as Kenya's road network has expanded, fewer train services run. I am directed to Nairobi's Railway Museum where, among rusting locomotives, the carriage where Ryall was mauled is parked near a row of cherry blossom trees.

There are other strange relics from the history of the Lunatic Express on display in the museum – and none stranger than a park bench mounted on the front of

an engine, from which passengers spotted wildlife as they passed through the countryside. Graced by famous buttocks including those of Winston Churchill and Edward VIII, the bench carries a discreet notice stating that the authorities "will not be liable for personal injury (fatal or otherwise)."

I ask the desk attendant if she can tell me more about the man-eating lions of the Lunatic Express. She smiles coyly, before rooting around in drawers full of paperwork to produce a small, plastic container.

"Don't be scared," she says, opening it to reveal the claws of the Tsavo man-eaters – the same claws that tore through the flesh of scores of men.

DESPITE the best efforts of fearsome lions, it was at the end of the railway line that the first safaris really got going – and no safari was more infamous than that of Theodore Roosevelt. Not one for a quiet retirement, in late 1909, the former American president disembarked the Lunatic Express

near Nairobi and marched off into the wilderness with a small army of servants in tow. To Roosevelt, safari meant big-game hunting, and he set out to shoot almost every species in East Africa, diligently noting their sizes and weights, speculating on their relative abilities to kill humans and occasionally remarking on how tasty they were to eat. After a hard day dodging charging animals, Roosevelt was determined not to sacrifice home comforts. Thus, scores of hapless porters slogged across swamp and savannah, carrying everything from a bathtub to a library for the president to peruse at his leisure.

I board a propeller plane heading east from Nairobi, and the territory where Roosevelt and his expedition once roamed rolls out beneath. From high up in the air, the African landscape looks like the scene of metaphysical drama. Grey columns of rain shift imperiously across the rusty-brown earth as slanting towers of sunlight break through the clouds. Beyond the starboard wing are the hills of the Great Rift Valley, stretching northwards to the Arabian



A pair of blue wildebeest in stubby grass. The annual wildebeest migration sees more than two million animals enter the Maasai Mara

Peninsula. Meanwhile, to the south is Kilimanjaro, rising abruptly from flat plains – as if K2 had been transplanted to the middle of East Anglia.

For all of its silliness and excess, Roosevelt's expedition kick-started the world's love affair with safari and its seductive cocktail of luxury and danger. It inspired a generation of smooth-talking European aristocrats and grizzled American pioneers to look upon East Africa as a playground – a wilderness in which to set about importing the trappings of Western life.

One American inspired by Roosevelt was Charlie Cottar – an Iowan maverick who envisioned East Africa as a new Wild West, and decided to found his own safari service here in 1919. Cottar's Safaris were among the first to bring photographic equipment to the bush, the first to bring cars on safari and the first to dredge these cars out of the sea when the ship carrying them sank off Mombasa.

Our plane dips below the clouds and grinds to a halt at an airstrip near Cottar's Camp – a cluster of tents on the edge of the Maasai Mara National Reserve, where Charlie's

'Roosevelt inspired Europeans and Americans to look upon East Africa as a playground'

great-grandson runs what's now Africa's oldest safari business.

"Some of those guys were nuts," says Calvin Cottar, gesturing at a portrait of his great-grandfather mounted on the canvas wall of the tent. "They'd do anything to collect scars."

Calvin recounts stories of Charlie's experiments in the early days of safari – from lassoing almost every beast in the bush, including a lion, to his colleagues forming a conga line in a bid to creep up on confused animals. The safari business has grown up somewhat in the years since, but the lavish

traditions of Roosevelt's era are preserved at Cottar's Camp. Scattered about our tents are antiques: Persian rugs, pith helmets, four-poster beds, and gramophones that crackle and squeak to the accompaniment of the chirping crickets outside.

I flick through an old scrapbook and happen across an article by Charlie Cottar, bragging of his antics: "Three times I was mauled by leopards, stomped on by elephants, to say nothing of minor brushes with lesser species. If you keep on taking chances, sooner or later some wild thing will get you." Sure enough, Charlie Cottar was killed by a charging rhino close to this camp in 1940. Having managed to discharge a fatal gunshot before it hit him, Charlie and the rhino died side by side.

"Africa had a dangerous animal behind every corner," Calvin tells me, watching clouds gathering on the horizon. "There's something special about living at the edge of human existence. This is a place where you could walk off on your own in any direction and you'd be guaranteed to be shit-scared within half an hour." →





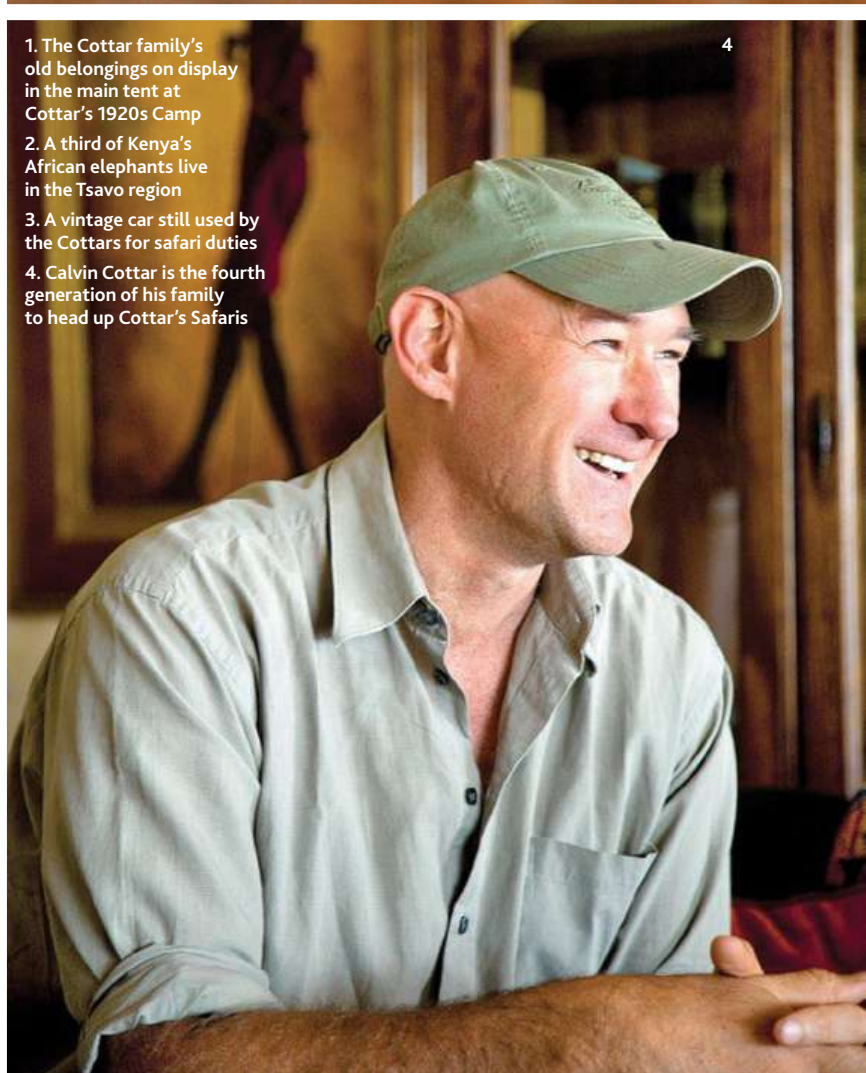
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1. The Cottar family's old belongings on display in the main tent at Cottar's 1920s Camp
2. A third of Kenya's African elephants live in the Tsavo region
3. A vintage car still used by the Cottars for safari duties
4. Calvin Cottar is the fourth generation of his family to head up Cottar's Safaris



Oblivious to passing aeroplanes, a leopard naps in a tree close to Keekorok Airstrip in the Maasai Mara National Reserve

A little more than half an hour later, we are driving through Cottar's Concession – a stretch of crumpled green hills at the edge of the Maasai Mara, where lions, leopards and elephants roam freely.

The scent of wild mint hangs in the air as we pass dusky ravines where baboons swing from the fig trees, swerving past brilliant-white bones stripped of flesh by vultures. Here, Mother Nature goes about her business on a blockbuster scale – insects built like tanks on wings buzz past and mammals leave dinosaur-size footprints in their wake. It is the same wild landscape early safari-goers would recognise.

"There are some things you see here that you can't explain," says my guide, Douglas Nagi – a man so accustomed to the bush that he was once bitten by a poisonous snake and didn't notice until days later. "One time I saw a leopard fighting a reticulated python for two hours for an antelope carcass. If I had put it on YouTube, I'd be famous by now."

Today, as in Roosevelt and Charlie Cottar's time, stories about dangerous animals

'Animals roam freely and Mother Nature goes about her business on a blockbuster scale'

are treated as badges of honour in the bush – but, often, it's the less likely goings-on that catch the eye. I glimpse an African wildcat – a creature that looks like a domestic moggy that has mistakenly wandered from the suburbs into the savannah – scampering off into the distance. I spot a solitary wildebeest in the midst of a herd of bulky eland antelope. "A wildebeest with an identity crisis," Douglas nods sagely.

Everywhere there is some spectacle unfurling in the bush – part of some vast, never-ending drama of which safari-goers only ever catch the slightest snippet. Lumbering over a fold in the hillside comes

a herd of elephants – their combined weight equalling that of an airliner – quietly and solemnly plodding past our vehicle. With their masses of crinkly skin, they seem like prehistoric impostors in the savannah – "some odd grim straggler from the Stone Age," as Churchill once put it during his travels aboard the Lunatic Express.

Our car climbs to the crest of one hill, where Douglas spies a lioness guarding a giraffe carcass from a mob of vultures. Having hunted the creature the previous night, her pride will return to dine on their kill – but, as she turns her back, the vultures shuffle forward and peck surreptitiously at the carcass. Suddenly, the lioness turns and lunges at the birds, swiping speculatively into a flurry of feathers, landing her paw right on top of one squawking vulture.

Seeing a big cat charging at such close range seems to trip some forgotten switch in your DNA – some reflex inherited from distant ancestors that quickens the pulse and sends a shiver down the spine. Primeval thrills like these are increasingly hard to come by in Kenya. In the century since the days of Roosevelt, big game populations →



‘The soundtrack of the bush plays on as it has done for time immemorial’

A lioness defends a giraffe carcass from hooded vultures and marabou storks

have nosedived across the continent, and this region counts among the last wild pockets left in the country. Rhinos that would, in another time, have charged at the Lunatic Express are threatened with extinction; some predict that lions could disappear from Kenya in a few decades.

The role that the first safari expeditions have played in this tragedy is complicated. They were accomplices in colonialism, and helped engender the complacency that has brought destruction to big game populations across Africa. Yet the story of these expeditions remains a compelling one. These were some of the first times that outsiders witnessed the majesty of the continent’s wildlife. They would also be among the last times when humans were confronted by a land where creatures more powerful than themselves were sovereign.

We return to camp, where the earth takes on a rich caramel hue in the sunset. Soon the night air rings with the notes of swooning birds and the thuds of mammals plodding about nearby. Having heard stories of the Tsavo man-eaters, it’s difficult to lie in bed without calculating the odds of a claw slicing through the canvas of my tent, or to mentally rehearse jabbing at an intruding beast with the nearest available piece of furniture.

No claw comes, but the soundtrack of the bush plays on outside the tent as it has done for time immemorial. Out of earshot nearby, lions will be grunting, baboons barking and elephants busy demolishing a tree. And somewhere far away from here, intermingled with this racket, is the whistle of the Lunatic Express, rattling on regardless into the night. 🐾





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OUT MORE!



Make it Happen: Kenya



The Okavango River runs for almost 1,440km through southwestern Africa

TRAVELLING SAFELY IN KENYA



FOR
ANOTHER
TAKEON
KENYA, TURN
TO OUR
GLOBETROTTER
SECTION

Every year, many thousands of tourists visit Kenya, the overwhelming majority doing so without a hitch. Yet East Africa can be a politically volatile part of the world, and, in recent years, problems in neighbouring Somalia have spilled over into Kenya. In late 2011, kidnappings targeted tourists staying on the Lamu archipelago on Kenya's northern coast – and at the time of writing, the British Foreign Office advises against all but essential travel to this part of the country. Though these incidents occurred a long way from Mombasa, Nairobi and the game parks featured in our story, travellers to Kenya should be vigilant. There have been recent threats of terrorist attack on Nairobi; check www.fco.gov.uk for updates. Walking through downtown Mombasa and Nairobi in the daytime is generally safe, but be careful not to flaunt mobile phones or ostentatious jewellery in public places – particularly around stations. Be aware that the FCO advises against all but essential travel to Nairobi's slums and townships because of high crime levels. Despite stories of man-eating lions and charging rhinos, dangerous animals rarely bother safari camps these days. Take care if moving on foot in the bush at night – guides are usually on hand to escort visitors between tents, although it helps to pack a torch. For more information on staying safe in Kenya – from vaccines to dodging scam artists – visit www.lonelyplanet.com/kenya.

MORE AFRICAN SAFARI EXPERIENCES

For many people, Kenya represents the archetypal safari destination – but there are plenty of places across the African continent to experience alternative animal encounters



TANZANIA

Tanzania is a place of superlatives – it can claim Africa's highest mountain, its largest protected area and some of the continent's most epic landscapes. **Gamewatchers** offers a three-night introduction to the country designed as an extension to a Kenyan safari, taking in Lake Manyara National Park, which is famous for its tree-climbing lions, before moving on to the Ngorongoro Crater. Here, guests can stay at a lodge on the rim of the crater. Having erupted and promptly collapsed in on itself a few million years ago, this former volcano is now home to one of Africa's last black rhino populations (www.porini.com; three-night trip from ₹99,420/ person on a twin-sharing basis).



UGANDA

Though it's a less-established safari destination than Kenya, Uganda's trump card is its primates. Trek through the mist-shrouded Bwindi Impenetrable Forest to scour for the mountain gorillas that inhabit the borders of Uganda, Rwanda and the Republic of Congo. Queen Elizabeth National Park provides a more typical safari experience with reclusive lions and leopards. Alternatively, take a boat along the Kazinga Channel to see hippos bathing, elephants drinking and alligators lurking. **Audley Travel** offers a 13-day Classic Uganda tour of Bwindi, Queen Elizabeth and other national parks (www.audleytravel.com; from ₹6,50,000/ person with flights).



BOTSWANA

A mosaic of wetlands, waterways and islands, the Okavango Delta has elephants and lions stomping about the place. **Windmill Holidays** can arrange for a nine-night, 10-day trip spanning the Okavango Delta, Makgadikgadi Salt Pans and the Moremi Game Reserve with meals, activities, internal flights between Okavango and Makgadikgadi and Makgadikgadi and Moremi. In Botswana, the stay options are usually either high-end or government-run; there's nothing in the mid-range category. To cut costs, opt for the government-run hotels (www.windmillholidays.in).

COMPILED BY OLIVER SMITH, WITH INPUTS FROM FRIVAN DRIVER
PHOTOGRAPHS: PHILIP LEE HARVEY, GETTY IMAGES, SHUTTERSTOCK, SUPERSTOCK/ALAMY

Essentials

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Once the migration of the wildebeest ends in October, prices drop, though the weather's still good for wildlife-watching, with sporadic bouts of rain. The second high season runs from January to March, sending prices soaring again.

GETTING THERE

Kenya Airways, Air Arabia, Qatar Airways, Ethiopian Airlines, Air India and Emirates fly to Nairobi Airport (return fares from ₹ 33,170).

GETTING AROUND

Often, the quickest way to get from Nairobi to the game parks is by plane – Safarilink operates direct flights from Nairobi Wilson Airport to Amboseli (www.flysafarilink.com; return fares from ₹ 20,300).

VISA

The visa to Kenya is on arrival for Indians, and costs ₹ 3,390 (USD 51). Fill out the visa form and carry three passport-sized photographs, passport and yellow fever card copies, your itinerary and return flight tickets (www.kenya.hicom-delhi.com).

EMBASSY ALERT

High Commission of India, Nairobi Kenya: www.hci.nairobi.co.ke

FURTHER READING

Try Lonely Planet's Kenya travel guide. Lonely Planet's Africa also has a chapter on Kenya. You can also download PDFs (www.lonelyplanet.com).

CURRENCY

₹ 1 = KES 1.56 (Kenyan Shilling)

VEG OUT/ FANCY A CURRY?

For good quality *desi* food that spans cuisines from across the country, try Open House Restaurant in Nairobi. There is also a variety of vegetarian food on offer (00-254-735-621-824; www.openhouserestaurant.co.ke; opp the Mall, Ring Rd, Parklands; 11am – 2pm, 7pm – 11pm, Sun – Sat; tandoori paneer tikka: ₹ 500).

GOOD TO KNOW

You will need to get a yellow-fever shot at least six days before you travel (centres available at Mumbai and New Delhi airports).

9 STEPS TO YOUR LUNATIC EXPRESS SAFARI...

1 Although modern-day safaris tend to begin in Nairobi, Mombasa is where expeditions traditionally started. Wander along the narrow alleyways and elaborate doorways that make up the old city, dropping in at Fort Jesus – an imposing, 16th-century Portuguese castle where cannons keep guard over the harbour (00-254-41-222-0058; www.museums.or.ke; Mombasa; 8am – 6pm; ₹ 300).



2 Rift Valley Railways now runs services on the old Lunatic Express line (above). Overnight services from Mombasa Railway Station to Nairobi operate three times a week. However, these services aren't always reliable and can be subject to change at short notice (www.eastafrica.shuttles.com; first-class dinner sleeper cabs with dinner: ₹ 2,950, book in advance).

3 A short stroll from Nairobi Railway Station, the Railway Museum has a fascinating collection of relics from the heyday of the Lunatic Express – from restaurant car menus to the claws of the Tsavo man-eaters themselves. Clamber aboard the rusting locomotives parked in the sidings next to the museum (00-254-720-049-975; www.krc.co.ke; Station Rd; 8am – 5pm; ₹ 320 adult, ₹ 70 child).

4 One of the last remaining landmarks of turn-of-the-century Nairobi, the luxury Norfolk Hotel is a mock-Tudor building into which the early safari-goers would check in after disembarking the Lunatic Express. Look out for the vintage cars parked in the courtyard and archive photos lining its corridors (00-254-20-226-5555; www.fairmont.com; Harry Thuku Rd; from ₹ 16,900 with breakfast).

5 Situated in the shadow of Mount Kilimanjaro, the Amboseli National Park is renowned for its flat, swamp-dotted landscapes, vast, widescreen horizons and a rumbustious local population of elephants. Windmill Holidays is among the tour operators that can arrange accommodation around the park vicinity, as well as transfers to and from Nairobi (www.windmillholidays.in).



6 Amboseli Porini Camp (right) is run in partnership with the local Masai community. Accommodation includes tents beneath shady trees (00-254-774-136-523; www.porini.com; Selenkay Conservation Area; from ₹ 24,800/ person/ night with all meals and selected beverages, park fees, shared game drives, night drives, sundowners, escorted walk and village visit).



7 A few hours' drive east of Amboseli, Campi Ya Kanzi (above) is an elegant, Italian-run eco-lodge with wood and thatched buildings on a scrubby hillside by the edge of Chyulu Hills National Park. The green ethos means that hot showers use solar panel-heated rainwater (00-254-720-461-300; www.maasai.com; PO Box 236, Mtito Andei; from ₹ 99,200 all inclusive, ₹ 6,700 conservation fee extra).

8 The Masai Mara National Reserve is – with good reason – Kenya's most popular safari destination. This stretch of grassland plays host to the annual wildebeest migration, although its concentrated populations of big cats are a big draw throughout the year. Tour operator Windmill Holidays is able to arrange trips in the Mara (www.windmillholidays.in).

9 Set at the edge of the Masai Mara, Cotter's 1920s Camp promises to recreate the romance of the early safaris. Take a game drive in its wood-panelled vintage car (00-254-73-377-3378; www.cottars.com; Cotter's Private Conservancy in Olderikesi; from ₹ 1,30,600 with meals, safaris, airstrip transfers, one massage/ tent and transfers to cultural visits; drinks and park conservation fees extra).

CLICK TO VIEW ON GOOGLE MAPS



Snow White & seven amazing days

That Switzerland is good only in summer is a notion that's as full of holes as Swiss cheese. It's truly also a winter wonderland, with sleigh rides, ice-skating and copious amounts of *glühwein* to make you feel part of a fairytale, if only for a week...

WORDS KANIKA GUPTA | PHOTOGRAPHS JYOTHY KARAT





YOU want me to go to Switzerland... *in the winter?*" I asked my editor somewhat skeptically. Being a true-blue Bombay girl, the slight nip in the air that our tropical 'winter' brings is just about all I can handle; I'd been hoping for an assignment to warmer climes. Ideally a place steeped in history and culture, with plenty of museums and art galleries to mosey through, something beyond just mountains and natural beauty. Most importantly, I wasn't overly enthused at the thought of Switzerland, a place that seemed as 'beaten path' as it gets! Still, being the intrepid traveller that I like to think I am, I suck it up and boldly go where all Indians have gone before. Only to be quickly disabused of *all* my ill-founded notions.

For one, visiting Switzerland at this time makes sense for more than just off-season airfares and a lowered probability of bumping into your neighbour. Brightly-lit Christmas markets resounding with the laughter of children and good cheer, ice-skating and sledding across a frozen lake

till your smile is frozen on your lips, thawing out with a hot cup of spiced wine... all these are the little joys that come out to play only during the winter, transforming a cold country into one of the warmest places you can visit.

Secondly, Switzerland has so much more to excite a traveller than just the snow-capped mountains and rolling green meadows that Yash Raj Films has, movie after movie, taught us to expect. Switzerland is a popular tourist destination not just for Indians, but with Europeans as well, with hosts of them descending on the Swiss Alps for some of the best skiing to be found on the Continent. Their idea of a vacation is completely different from ours – packed with adventure sports, leisurely sojourns at the spa, and *après-ski* drinks and parties, as I experience in St Moritz. Even the more conventional options of Lucerne and Mt Titlis have something unique that set my trip apart – a walk through the 'art gallery' that is Old Lucerne, a tour of the Engelberg Monastery with a priest, an igloo stay in the shadow of Mt Titlis...



St Moritz

It's all about loving yourself

Nestled among pristine snow-capped peaks, St Moritz in the Engadin Valley is considered to be *the* playground of Europe's rich and famous. As I step out of the station, I realise this is *literally* true – everywhere I look, there are (ski) suited-and-booted people toting skis, and toddlers sitting pretty on sleds.

With over 350km of *pistes* across four peaks, St Moritz is a skiers' paradise, a description Jyothy my photographer and I hope to use before our trip is through, dreams of conquering the slopes looming large in our eyes. But first comes conquering the gear – each ski boot weighs about 1.5kg, and walking in them is like balancing on 6-inch stilettos... on tiptoe. Then come the skis themselves, wicked-sharp, six-foot extensions of your feet that make us feel about as elegant as Ronald McDonald. Still, under the tutelage of our patient instructor, we learn how to stop and ski down a gentle slope on **Corviglia**. It's exhausting, exhilarating, and teaches us an important lesson: when you fall (and you *will*), don't be down and out; make a snow angel instead!

We lunch at **Mathis' La Marmite**, a sunlit restaurant with 360° vistas of the slopes, which is open only in the winter and apparently introduced the concept of 'fine mountain dining' back in 1967. The *flammkuchen*, like a thin-crust Swiss pizza, and the decadent potato puree with black truffle are a bit pricey, but given the smattering of caviar and truffles across the menu and the fact that this eatery used to be a favourite of the Shah of Iran, it's perhaps not too surprising.

Next in our 'day in the life of a European tourist' comes a visit to the **Kulm Hotel Spa**. The indoor heated pool, steam, sauna and jacuzzi aside, what I really love here is the 'outdoor' area, where, immersed in 34° C water with the cold air and dying rays of the sun caressing our cheeks, we watch the mountains. This sense of wellbeing extends to dinner, an authentic Swiss affair at the unassuming **Acla** in the Schweizerhof Hotel, where the →



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1. Soaking in the sights at the spa in the Kulm Hotel

2. Skiing's a lot harder than it looks – be prepared to be outshone by toddlers on skis if you're a first-timer!

3. Great meals are the norm in St Moritz

4. People from across Europe come to St Moritz to 'winter'

Facing page: The tiny, snowy hamlet of Engelberg at the foot of Mt Titlis

Previous pages: Christmas cheer overtakes Switzerland

3

4



season's menu affords us a chance to sample *mangold terrine* (cottage cheese wrapped in salad leaves with caramelised walnuts and pickled apricots), *pizzocheri* (buckwheat noodles with cheese and potato) and *Zuri geschnetzeltes* (Zürich-style venison with crispy potato *rösti*).

The best way to wrap up is with *après-ski*, the post-ski nightlife St Moritz is known for. We kick things off at **Bamyan Ski Club**, a kitschy pop-up lounge with *ghee* tin lights, where we first sample hot, spiced *glühwein* and *toddy*, a heady, heated concoction of rum, sugar, orange and lemon (www.bamyanskiclub.com). Next up, **Diamond Lounge**, empty except for Diego, a transvestite from Portugal who shares pictures of his favourite ensembles over a Schnapps cocktail (www.diamond-stmoritz.ch).

This is one of the best things about St Moritz – the local population numbers barely 4,000, and the remaining people are travellers from all over Europe who descend here for the winter, only too happy to share a drink and a story with you. Diego also pointed us in the direction of the next party, at **Hotel Misani** the next town over, where we see more people than we've seen so far in Switzerland: the underground pub is packed to its bare walls with people dancing the night away to ABBA, with a fire-eating, flame-throwing bartender to heat things up even further (www.hotelmisani.ch).

While the natural wonders of Corviglia and **Corvatsch** – the sporty peak with a night ski run and a park for snowboarders – are the main attractions for visitors, there are lots of other things to do. We go on a guided tour through the famous **Via Serlas**, or Shopping Mile, old buildings packed with everything from Armani to Zegna. St Moritz is so upscale that even the local butcher is exclusive; **Hatecke** serves up the best *bundnerfleisch*, a salty cured meat that is air-dried for months and eaten cold, and a venison sausage that is available post hunting season. What's so exclusive about that, you ask? Well, there's an animal doctor



present when cattle are slaughtered, so that the animals are calm and 'fear hormones' don't accumulate in the meat! Over dessert of *nusstorte* (spiced nut cake) and the seasonal chestnut vermicelli at the 120-year-old **Hanselmann**, both of which I'm nuts for, our affable guide Mario tells us more about the history of St Moritz.

Something as mundane as water is what started summer tourism – royals from the equivalent of Germany, Spain, Holland and the like used to come here in the 1500s to drink the water, rich in natural gas and the closest thing to soda that was available back then. Cycling and hiking were also popular here in later years, especially with the English. Johann Badrutt, owner of the **Kulm Hotel**, invited his English guests to stay on through the winter, promising that it would be warm enough for them to go sleeveless through the day. If they didn't enjoy it, he declared, he would personally cover the cost of their 12.5-hour-long carriage trip to Chur.

Needless to say, they stayed, St Moritz became a popular winter destination, and the terrace on which the landmark conversation happened at the historic Kulm was dutifully 'oohed' at.

Across from the hotel is the ancient **Leaning Tower** (not of Pisa) and the **Cresta Rider statue**; the Cresta Run being a 1.2km ice run from St Moritz to Cresta, in which riders lie stomach-down on a skeleton frame. Interestingly, women are not allowed on the Cresta Run, for reasons unknown. Mario lets us in on the secret; apparently, the President of the St Moritz Tobogganing Club (SMTTC) was soundly beaten by his wife back in 1929,

and miffed, he teamed up with a doctor who claimed the vibrations of the skeleton could cause breast cancer in women, thus giving him reason to 'ban' them.

My personal favourite 'thing to do in St Moritz', though, is a horse-drawn sleigh ride, on a *proper* sleigh, like the one I'd seen Santa Claus 'ho ho ho' away my entire childhood. Nestled deep into the furs that line the carriage, passing through the silent woods, crossing a tinkling stream, watching the sun gild the mountain peaks, with nary a soul in sight, I feel like a 17th-century Cinderella on her way to the ball.

You have to hand it to the Europeans – they really know how to treat themselves right – and at the end of our two-day stay at St Moritz, I'm feeling totally rejuvenated and ready to head out again.

Lucerne

Explore secrets hidden in plain sight

As soon as we step out at Lucerne (or Luzern, depending on whether you want to be French or German about it), we spy it: the **Chapel Bridge**, Europe's oldest covered wooden bridge, and the **Water Tower**, Switzerland's most photographed monument. The Water Tower is pretty as a picture: sitting in the middle of the Reuss River that divides the city, this 13th-century remnant used to form the then-city's **older** wall, overlooking a swamp, and criminals would be hanged from its beams to dissuade any would-be trespassers. Today, the grisliness has given way to a more cultured restaurant, →

The frozen-over lake outside KKL Lucerne is a favourite with locals looking to ice-skate

Facing page:

1. We met more people at the party in Hotel Misani than we met anywhere else in Switzerland
2. A divine mousse, chocolate and cake dessert at Mathis' La Marmite



the weapons used by assassins for hire, Switzerland's main source of income in the 16th century, are stored in a secret room and can be visited on request.

Lucerne is a lovely walking city, with a lot of 'secrets' to be uncovered: as we munch on freshly-roasted chestnuts, we walk past **Ritterscher Palace**, a 16th-century private residence for Lucerne's mayor modelled on the Italian Renaissance-style that today serves as the main government building. It is also home to a gallery dedicated to 17th-century *danse macabre* or Dance of Death paintings; a Children's Parliament, which has, so far, given out a Sour Lemon award (when the city tried to shut the children's park) and a Red Lollipop (when it didn't); and the cleanest toilet you can use for free.

Next door is the **Jesuit Church of Lucerne**, the first Baroque church in Switzerland, constructed in 1666 and worth a visit for the sheer beauty of its inner sanctum. **Spreuer** or **Mill Bridge**, so named because wheat chaff used to be thrown into the river here, is one place where looking up is the norm rather than watching your feet – 67 Dance of Death paintings, added between 1626 and 1635, grace the arches. Stopping for a glass of hot chocolate at a local Christmas market, we reach the **Old City Square**, where the archaic frescoes on the buildings immediately captivate the eye. This art served a purpose: when the Benedictine Monastery was founded here in 730 AD, the place was little more than a fishing village built on a rock, with a largely uneducated population. The buildings were painted to ensure comprehension of ideas, such as the Tree of Life and the bats of medicine on the erstwhile apothecary building and the pretzel and the family shields of the bakers at **Pfister**, a restaurant that used to serve as the Guild of Bakers. As we pass the statue of Fritzche, we also learn more about **Fasnacht**, the Lucerne carnival, a celebration before Lent in which thousands of people take to the streets in fantastical masks and costumes amid carnival bands



and showers of oranges (thrown from the statue in honour of the centuries-old tradition to distribute Vitamin C). It's full of strange little traditions, like the one in which the chairman of the music committee needs to moon everyone, and it makes us wish we'd postponed our trip by a couple of months.

Lucerne also has a number of great museums to visit, like the **Glacier Garden**, a museum devoted to glaciers with a walkthrough of Earth's evolution and, the **Museum Sammlung Rosengart**, home to works by Monet, Picasso, Chagall and Cézanne among others, and the **Museum of History**, with a theatre tour of Lucerne's past. But my personal favourite is the **Swiss Museum of Transport**. It's a behemoth of a place that kids and adults alike can get lost in, with individual buildings dedicated to air, nautical, road and rail transport. Most of the descriptions are in German, but there's still plenty to enthrall, like the simulators in which you can drive a train or pilot a plane, the multi-level parking, which showcases cars from 1886 to now, the Swiss Arena that houses a 1:20,000 scale map of Switzerland you can walk over, and, lately, the Swiss Chocolate Tour, which is a multimedia ride that explains the production of chocolate, ending with some delectable treats in your pocket. A visit to the **Lion Monument**, a 10m-long sculpture of a dying lion carved into the rock face in 1820 to commemorate Swiss soldiers who died in the French revolution, is also a must: Mark Twain was spot on when he called it "the saddest and most moving piece of rock in the world."

We head to the **KKL Luzern**, the Culture and Convention Centre, by night. It draws →



1. Engelberg is a picture-perfect town, made all the prettier by a blanket of snow
2. The Glacier Cave is one of the many attractions that you'll find on Mt Titlis
3. Despite the cold, the friendly people at Engelberg will warm you right up!
- 4 & 7. The coat of arms at the Benedictine Monastery in Engelberg hides the secrets of its history
5. Lucerne oozes old-world charm
6. Skihutte Stand at the Titlis middle station dishes up hearty meals

Facing page:

1. You could spend hours at the Swiss Museum of Transport in Lucerne
2. Ice skating at the Sporting Park in Engelberg





locals for a spot of ice-skating on the lake outside (with adorable little penguin supports to hold you up) and *raclette*, a Swiss winter dish of melted cheese and gherkins over bread or potato (www.kkl-luzern.ch). If skating is not your thing, you can opt for a fondue cruise on the placid waters of **Lake Lucerne**, painted a fiery red by the dying light of the sun.

Engelberg & Mt Titlis

Where history meets adventure

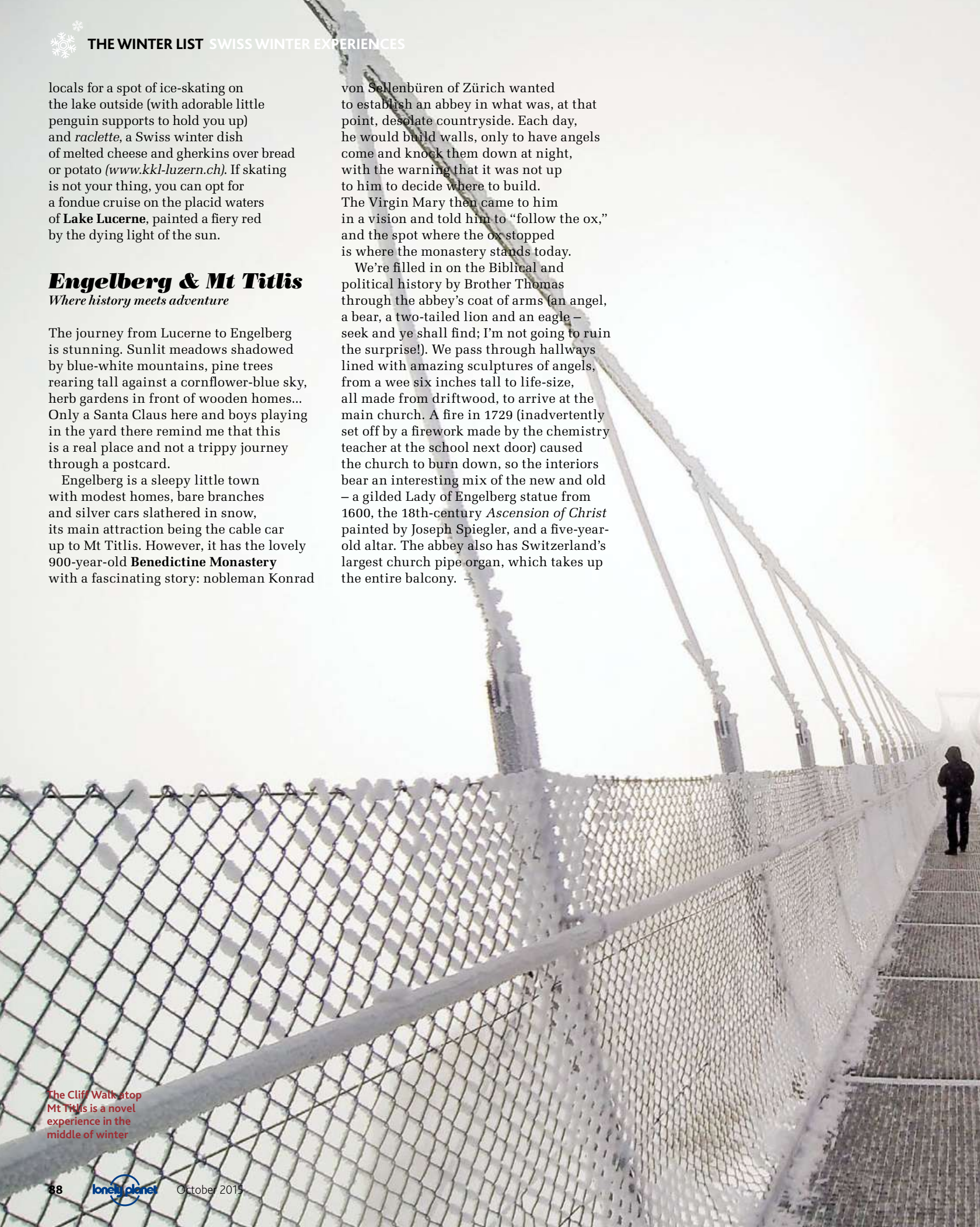
The journey from Lucerne to Engelberg is stunning. Sunlit meadows shadowed by blue-white mountains, pine trees rearing tall against a cornflower-blue sky, herb gardens in front of wooden homes... Only a Santa Claus here and boys playing in the yard there remind me that this is a real place and not a trippy journey through a postcard.

Engelberg is a sleepy little town with modest homes, bare branches and silver cars slathered in snow, its main attraction being the cable car up to Mt Titlis. However, it has the lovely 900-year-old **Benedictine Monastery** with a fascinating story: nobleman Konrad

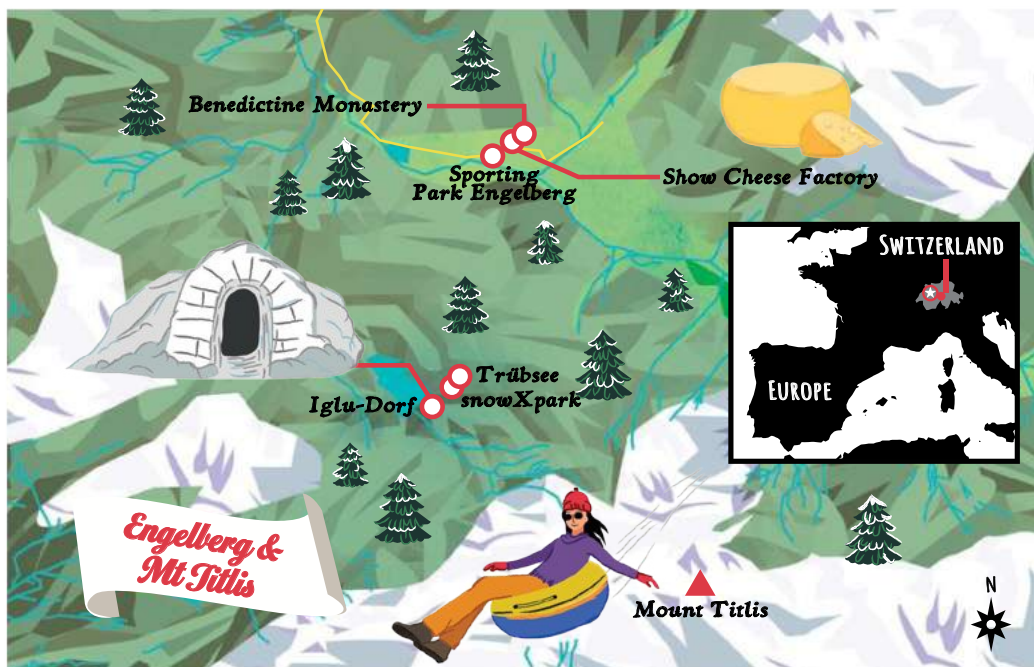
von Sellenbüren of Zürich wanted to establish an abbey in what was, at that point, desolate countryside. Each day, he would build walls, only to have angels come and knock them down at night, with the warning that it was not up to him to decide where to build. The Virgin Mary then came to him in a vision and told him to “follow the ox,” and the spot where the ox stopped is where the monastery stands today.

We're filled in on the Biblical and political history by Brother Thomas through the abbey's coat of arms (an angel, a bear, a two-tailed lion and an eagle – seek and ye shall find; I'm not going to ruin the surprise!). We pass through hallways lined with amazing sculptures of angels, from a wee six inches tall to life-size, all made from driftwood, to arrive at the main church. A fire in 1729 (inadvertently set off by a firework made by the chemistry teacher at the school next door) caused the church to burn down, so the interiors bear an interesting mix of the new and old – a gilded Lady of Engelberg statue from 1600, the 18th-century *Ascension of Christ* painted by Joseph Spiegler, and a five-year-old altar. The abbey also has Switzerland's largest church pipe organ, which takes up the entire balcony. ➔

The Cliff Walk atop Mt Titlis is a novel experience in the middle of winter







The adorable, three-year-old husky we spent time with at SnowXPark

We traipse from that to a whole new world; next door to the church is the **Show Cheese Factory**, where we learn how cheese is made, and then (more importantly) buy some to bring home, and enjoy a cup of hot chocolate with *ziger-krapfen*, a deep-fried mix of ricotta and cinnamon, and *lebkuchen*, a special chocolate Christmas cake.

And now... **Mt Titlis**. Its popularity as a tourist destination for Indians is unparalleled; there's even a giant cut-out of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* at the top! I'm willing myself to keep an open mind as we get off the famed Swiss Rotair at the topmost station of Kein Titlis, which, at 3,028m above sea level, allegedly offers a view of up to 80 per cent of Switzerland on a clear day. Sadly, we don't have one of those, and plow through what I would call a blizzard (and locals call Thursday) to the **Cliff Walk**, a 100m-long suspension bridge that's the highest in Europe. A blur of white and silence surrounds us, but I'm almost glad for the conditions. For when the sun comes out and bounces off the snowflakes wafting in the air around us, it's like walking through powdered diamonds, a glimmer here, a sparkle there...

After we warm up with a bowl of creamy ice cream (that's actually warmer than the ambient temperature), we head down to the seasonal **Skihutte Stand** at the middle station for a spot of authentic Swiss lunch, away from the overpriced fare at the top. The food here is simply outstanding – rustic yet delicious potato *strudel*, homemade *spaetzle* (pasta) in cheesy sauce, and Angus meatballs with peas and mash, all washed down with copious amounts of *haxetee* (peppermint tea with plum Schnapps).

Then comes **Trübsee Snow Park**, an oversized adventure park for kids of all ages. The **SnowXPark** is where you can ride custom-built electric snowmobiles; it's being set up when we're there as the snow's late, and we settle for playing with Heidi, the owners' husky instead. We watch people set up **Igludorf**, a complex where you can shun the creature comforts of a hotel and live in an igloo instead. For the adventurous sorts, there's also snow tubing, sledding and skiing, and the chance to catch the Ski Jumping World Cup at Engelberg if you time your visit right. A far cry from what I'd expected from Mt Titlis.

In fact, at the end of my week in Switzerland, I felt like I did seeing Russian nesting dolls for the first time – there's the doll you see on the outside, but you open her up and hidden within is another, and then another, till I trilled with delight at the realisation that there was so much more to this doll than I had ever imagined. ©



MAP: RADHA RAMACHANDRAN



Make it Happen: Switzerland

Essentials

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Although Indians think Switzerland is best in the summer vacations, it's great year-round. The winter (Dec–Mar) sees serious snow and snow-sports at high altitudes.

GETTING THERE

Swiss International Airlines, Etihad Airways, Lufthansa, Jet Airways, Emirates, Air France, Air India and British Airways fly to Zürich's International Airport from Mumbai and New Delhi (return fares from ₹ 35,200).

GETTING AROUND

The Swiss Travel Pass (3, 4, 8 or 15 days) gives you access to Switzerland's rail, bus and boat transport, and also has free entry/ discounts on select intra-city trams, cable cars and museums. Order online at www.swisstravelsystem.com (from ₹ 14,470/ adult/ three-day second class pass. A Swiss Family Card is provided free, enabling children from 6 to 16 years to travel free if with at least one paying parent).

VISA

Schedule an appointment for a Schengen visa to visit Switzerland through VFS. Applicable for a maximum of 90 days, the visa costs ₹ 4,200 (plus ₹ 988 VFS service charges), and processing time is about one week.

EMBASSY ALERT

Embassy of India, Bern: www.indembassybern.ch

CURRENCY

1 CHF = ₹ 68.91

VEG OUT/ FANCY A CURRY?

Five minutes from Zürich's main station is Korma Sutra, which serves North Indian food like biryani, dal makhani and a host of vegetarian options (00-41-44-252-4848; www.kormasutra.ch; Mühlegasse 5; 11am–2pm, 5.30pm–11pm Mon–Fri, 5.30pm–11pm Sat–Sun; veg biryani: ₹ 1,800).

GOOD TO KNOW

Buy a Lucerne Museum Card, which entitles you to entry to all Lucerne museums over two consecutive days (www.luzern.com; buy from Lucerne Tourist Information or railway station; ₹ 2,500/ person).

MAKE THE MOST OF SWITZERLAND IN WINTER: AN IDEAL ITINERARY

Days 1–3: St Moritz Arrive in Zürich and put your Swiss Pass to good use by taking the train to **St Moritz**. Check into **Hotel Schweizerhof**, one of the few hotels here open year-round, and home to the popular Stübli bar and Acla restaurant (00-41-81-837-0707; www.schweizerhofstmoritz.ch; Via dal Bagn 54; from ₹ 22,800). Walk down to the café at **Hotel Hauser** for the traditional Swiss pasta *pizokels* (spinach dumplings) or *capuns* (bacon and cheese with *spaelzli*) (00-41-81-837-5018; www.hotelhauser.ch; Via Traunter Plazzas 7; 7.30am–11pm; *pizokels*: ₹ 1,400). Then take a taxi to the **Corvatsch** base station, from where you can take the glass-sided cable car up to an altitude of 3,303m for spectacular views of the Piz Bernina, the highest peak of the Eastern Alps, and Lake Silvaplana (www.corvatsch.ch; return trip from ₹ 3,800, check for hotel or Swiss Pass discount). Head to the city centre to window-shop on **Via Serlas**. Stop by **Confiserie Hanselmann** for Engadiner *nusstorte* (Engadin nut cake) (00-41-81-833-3864; www.hanselmann.ch; Via Maistra 8; 7.30am–7pm; from ₹ 600/ 125g) and then for *bundnerfleisch* (air-dried meat) at **Hatecke** (00-41-81-864-1175; www.hatecke.ch; Via Maistra 16; from ₹ 630/ 125g). Start the next day with a ski lesson – we learnt from and liked Alexandra Corrigan of **Schweizer Skischule** (00-41-81-830-0101; www.skischool.ch; Via Stredas 14; from ₹ 8,310/ three hours); rent a ski suit and skis from **Ski Service** (00-41-81-838-7788; www.skiservice-estm.com; 8am–6.30pm Mon–Sat, till 6pm Sun; check website for prices), take the half-day pass (from ₹ 4,300, check for hotel or Swiss Pass discount) and hit **Corviglia's** slopes! Treat yourself to lunch at **Mathis' La Marmite** (00-41-81-833-6355; www.mathisfood.ch; 11.30am–3.30pm; from ₹ 3,400). Next, relax at the **Kulm Hotel Spa** (00-41-81-836-8274; www.kulm.com; Via Veglia 18; check website for timings; sore-muscle bath: ₹ 4,980). Grab dinner at **Acla** (see **Hotel Schweizerhof**; 10am–11pm; mains from ₹ 2,450), then head out for a night of *après-ski*. **Stübli** at **Hotel Schweizerhof** (8pm–3am; cocktails from ₹ 750) is casual, while **King's Club** at **Badrutt's Palace** is where the swish set lets its hair down (00-41-81-837-1000; www.badruttspalace.com; Via Serlas 27; 10pm–late, only winter; beer from ₹ 500). On your last day in St Moritz, take a taxi to the picturesque **Sils Maria**, where you can enjoy a horse-drawn carriage ride (St Moritz Tourist Information: 00-41-81-826-5286; www.engadin-stmoritz.ch; return ride from ₹ 1,700/ person, ₹ 6,640/ four people). Return to St Moritz and board a train to Lucerne via Zürich.

Days 4–5: Lucerne Begin your day with a two-hour **walking tour** (00-41-41-227-1717; www.luzern.com; Zentralstrasse 5; set meeting point, check schedule and timings

online; ₹ 1,250). Replenish your energy with a meal at **Pfistern** (00-41-41-410-3650; www.restaurant-pfistern.ch; Kornmarkt 4; 9am–12am Mon–Sat, till 11pm Sun; mains from ₹ 1,600). A short walk will bring you to the **Lion**

Monument (Denkmalstrasse 4; free). Hop across to **Glacier Garden** (00-41-41-410-4340; www.gletschergarten.ch; Denkmalstrasse 4; check website for timings; ₹ 1,030). End the night with the **Cheese Fondue and Raclette Cruise** on Lake Lucerne (00-41-41-367-6767; www.lakelucerne.ch; departs at 7.12pm from Lucerne Pier 1; ₹ 4,500/ person for 2.5 hours/ all-you-can-eat buffet). Spend the night at the **Hotel Schweizerhof**

– no relation to the one in St Moritz! (00-41-41-410-0410; www.schweizerhof-luzern.ch; Schweizerhofquai; from ₹ 26,370). The next day, take the bus (free with Swiss Pass) to the **Swiss Museum of Transport** (00-41-41-370-4444; www.verkehrshaus.ch; Lidostrasse 5; check website for timings; from ₹ 2,060, free with Lucerne Museum Card). Get out in time to visit the **Sammlung Rosengart Museum collection** (00-41-41-220-1660; www.rosengart.ch; Pilatusstrasse 10; check website for timings; from ₹ 1,240, free with Lucerne Museum Card). Unwind with a glass of *glühwein* or spiced rum (from ₹ 260) at one of the many **Christmas markets** if you're there in December (Franziskanerplatz; Dec 3–20).

Days 6–7: Engelberg & Mt Titlis

Make the hour-long journey to Engelberg. Check into the **Titlis Resort**, a block of lovely holiday apartments (00-41-41-639-5000; www.titlisresort.ch; Alpenstrasse 11; studio flat from ₹ 7,950). Hit the **Show Cheese Factory** (00-41-41-638-0888; www.schaukaeserei-engelberg.ch; Klosterhof; 9am–6.30pm Mon–Sat, till 5pm Sun; entry free, price depends on group size and choice of activity), then head to the 12th-century **Benedictine Monastery** (00-41-41-639-6119; www.kloster-engelberg.ch; 9am–12pm, 3pm–6pm Mon–Sat; check website for the guided tour schedule; ₹ 700). Try your legs at ice-skating at the **Sporting Park Engelberg** (00-41-41-639-6000; www.sportingpark.ch; Engelbergerstrasse 11;



9am–10pm; from ₹ 550, check rental prices online). Eat fondue at **Alpenclub** (00-41-41-637-1243; www.alpenclub.ch; 6390, Engelberg; check website for timings; mains from ₹ 1,800). Follow it up with a decadent apple cake at the nearby **Gadä Bar** (from 4pm Fri–Sat; ₹ 900). The next day, go up **Mt Titlis**! Rent snow boots at **Titlis Sport** (00-41-41-639-6070; www.titlis-sport.ch; Klosterstrasse 9). Take the cable car from Engelberg to **Trübsee**, then the 360° rotating **ROTAIR** to Mt Titlis (00-41-41-639-5050; www.titlis.ch; 8.30am–4.50pm; return from ₹ 6,000 discounted with the Swiss Pass). Do the **Cliff Walk** (free), and take the **Ice Flyer** chair-lift up to the ski slopes (from ₹ 800). Skip the crowded restaurants at the top and head down to **Stand Station** and **Skihutte Stand**, a winter-only restaurant for a Swiss meal (00-41-41-639-5085; winters only; mains from ₹ 1,260). Then, it's back to Trübsee! Ride an electric snowmobile at **SnowXPark** (00-41-79-822-5379; www.snowxpark.ch; entry: ₹ 350, ₹ 130/ driving minute) and snowtube down a track on a rubber tyre at the **Trübsee Snow Park** (Dec–Apr; free). There's even skiing, cross-country skiing, tobogganing and snowshoeing available for those interested (check website for all details). You can spend the night in an igloo built under the starry skies at **Iglu Dorf** (00-41-41-612-2728; www.iglu-dorf.com; Standard Igloo: ₹ 21,700/ night). **Day 8** Leave Engelberg for Zürich in time to catch your flight back home.

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LINKS TO FIND
OUT MORE!



INDIAN OCEAN

FIND YOUR PERFECT ISLAND

Whether your passion is for spicy food, unique wildlife, jungle treks or pristine beaches, this vast ocean is home to your dream remote getaway

The Raa Atoll consists of
88 islands in the northern
reaches of the Maldives



The Maldives: for diving and desert islands

WHAT ARE THE ISLANDS LIKE? Seen on a map, the Maldives are a nation like no other on Earth: a string of 26 atolls and some 1,192 microscopic islands – none higher than a metre or two above sea level. Seen in real life, they're the archetypal sandy banks of daydreams and glossy holiday brochures, with some of the world's swankiest accommodation and perhaps the best diving in the Indian Ocean.

WHOM WILL IT APPEAL TO? Traditionally, the only way to visit the Maldives was to check in at one of the islands' resorts – most of which occupy their own private islands. These vary from ₹ 10,000 a night at the budget end, to some of the most expensive lodgings on the planet. Independent travel has only recently been permitted in the Maldives –

it's a small-scale enterprise, but visitors get around with an expanding network of ferries and stay in simple guesthouses.

WHAT EXPERIENCES WILL I HAVE?

Underwater encounters are the abiding memory of any visit to the Maldives: head to the Ari Atoll to go diving with whale sharks – the world's largest fish (fortunately content with their diet of plankton). Snorkellers, meanwhile, should make for Addu Atoll in the south, which is home to the most pristine coral in the archipelago.

WHERE'S THE BEST BEACH? Each resort has its own private beach – they're broadly similar, but among the finest are those at Kuredu Island, Soneva Fushi, Rihiveli Beach and Vilu Reef, all with the requisite white sands and blue waters.

WHEN SHOULD I GO? Low season in the Maldives lasts from May to November: rain and storms are more likely, but prices are cheaper and marine life can be more plentiful, particularly around the western shores of the country.

HOW TO GET THERE? Air India, SpiceJet and Sri Lankan Airlines fly to Male Airport from most major Indian cities (*return fares from ₹ 15,000 from Bangalore*).

WHERE TO STAY? Built around a former RAF base on Addu Atoll, the excellent-value **Equator Village** resort has some of the best diving around (www.equatorvillage.com; from ₹ 13,200).

MORE INFO Lonely Planet's *Maldives* travel guide has detailed information on the archipelago. →



Waterfalls cascade down the deep canyon of Trou de Fer (Iron Hole) on Réunion

Réunion: for adrenaline rushes and inland exploration

WHAT'S THE ISLAND LIKE? Though technically an overseas department of France, Réunion closely resembles the tropical islands depicted in the *King Kong* and *Jurassic Park* movies: mighty thundering waterfalls, smouldering volcanoes and miles of beaches. That said, there are signs of human life too: with lively nightlife in towns like Saint-Pierre, and a distinctive cuisine reflecting the island's mixed African, Creole and Indian heritage.

WHOM WILL IT APPEAL TO? While Réunion has a long coast with plenty of resorts, the real adventure is inland: be it on the eerie, Martian-like volcanic plateau of Plaine des Sables, or among the plunging ravines and towering summits of Cirque de Mafate –

a landscape more reminiscent of the Andes than an Indian Ocean island.

WHAT EXPERIENCES WILL I HAVE? Hiking trails crisscross the island, but perhaps the most epic walk is up to the caldera of the Piton de la Fournaise – one of the world's most active volcanoes, and a manageable five-hour hike from the trailhead. Other adrenaline-inducing experiences include canyoning among the raging torrents of the Cirque de Cilaos, or else seeing the island's dramatic scenery from a safe distance aboard a scenic flight.

WHERE'S THE BEST BEACH? Réunion isn't blessed with the most beautiful beaches in the Indian Ocean, but the pick of them are on the west coast: try out La Saline les Bains.

WHEN SHOULD I GO? Réunion can be visited year round, but it's wise to avoid visiting during French school holidays in late summer, or in cyclone season, from December to April. Whale-watching season runs from June to October.

HOW TO GET THERE? Air France flies to Réunion Island from Mumbai and New Delhi (return fares from ₹ 86,000).

WHERE TO STAY? *Senteur Vanille* is a handsome Creole house set among fruit trees near Saint-Gilles les Hauts (www.senteurvanille.com; from ₹ 5,565, minimum two nights' stay required).

MORE INFO See Lonely Planet's *Mauritius, Réunion & Seychelles* for detailed information about the island. →



At more than 60 years old,
Rajan is the last in a long
line of swimming elephants
on the Andaman Islands

Andaman Islands: for remoteness

WHAT ARE THE ISLANDS LIKE? India's remotest territory, the jungle-covered Andaman and Nicobar Islands feel like the country's last frontier, and are home to ancient tribal groups. Although the Nicobar Islands are essentially off limits, many of the Andamans are open to visitors.

WHOM WILL IT APPEAL TO? Discerning scuba-divers and anyone who prefers their tropical islands untamed

WHAT EXPERIENCES WILL I HAVE? There's a smattering of historical sites – in the island capital Port Blair, the Cellular Jail once held dissidents under the British Raj, while, just

offshore, the overgrown ruins on Ross Island are a kind of Victorian mini Angkor Wat. But for most visitors, the main attraction is Havelock Island, where coral gardens and marine life, including sea turtles, are accessible to even novice divers.

WHERE'S THE BEST BEACH? Radhanagar Beach on Havelock Island (also known as Beach 7) is a mile-long arc of sand, backed by native forest. As with most Andaman beaches, sandflies are a problem: on the plus side, you may get to meet Rajan, the now-retired swimming elephant (*by appointment at the Barefoot at Havelock Resort*).

WHEN SHOULD I GO? If diving is the priority, the clearest waters can be found from mid-November to April. The monsoon hits in a big way from mid-May to September, with a smaller comeback from November to January.

HOW TO GET THERE? Air India, Go Air, Jet Airways and SpiceJet fly to Port Blair Airport from all major Indian cities (*return fares from ₹ 14,700 from Kolkata*).

WHERE TO STAY? The cottages at **Wild Orchid** are among the most comfortable options on Havelock (www.wildorchidandaman.com).

MORE INFO See Lonely Planet's *India* travel guide for more on the Andaman Islands. →

PHOTOGRAPH: CORBIS





Sri Lanka: for temples and trains

WHAT'S THE ISLAND LIKE? The most populous island in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka's glorious coastline is surpassed only by the riches of its interior: crumbling temples and sleepy Colonial-era towns, wondrously rickety hill railways and national parks, where elephants, crocodiles and buffalo stomp about.

WHOM WILL IT APPEAL TO? Sri Lanka is ideal for independent travellers: distances are relatively short, public transport is plentiful, and driver and vehicle hire is inexpensive. Accommodation is diverse and, recently, there's been a slew of smaller, more desirable hotels opening up in towns like Galle.

WHAT EXPERIENCES WILL I HAVE?

Sri Lanka's colonial history is best understood with a stroll around Galle – a town ringed by mighty fortifications, guarding a jumble of mosques, temples and grand townhouses within its ramparts.

As with anywhere on the subcontinent, train rides are an essential experience: be sure to ride the slow train to Ella, chuntering among slopes carpeted with quivering tea leaves.

WHERE'S THE BEST BEACH? Marakolliya in the south is a contender for Sri Lanka's most perfect stretch of sand, with clusters of nodding palms backing onto a thick mangrove lagoon.

WHEN SHOULD I GO? The best time to visit is from December to March, with fewer visitors during the monsoon season from May to August. That said, a monsoon highlight is Esala Perahera – a grand festival in the town of Kandy in July.

HOW TO GET THERE? Sri Lankan Airlines, Jet Airways and Air India fly to Colombo from all major Indian cities (*return fares from ₹ 10,600*).

WHERE TO STAY? Fort Printers is a characterful hotel housed in a former printing press in Galle (www.thefortprinters.com; from ₹ 10,620 with breakfast).

MORE INFO For more information, see Lonely Planet's *Sri Lanka*.

The Buddhist rock temples of Mulikirigala in southern Sri Lanka date back 2,000 years

The Seychelles: for serene beaches and wild jungles

WHAT ARE THE ISLANDS LIKE?

An archipelago of 115 miniature islands adrift in the Indian Ocean, the Seychelles, in many ways, conforms to the honeymoon brochure expectation of a tropical island. And yet, there's plenty to surprise the first-time visitor: giant tortoises, gigantic coconuts and large tracts of rainforest that invite the thud of a hiker's footfall. Though the Seychelles territory is spread over half a million square miles, the total landmass is just 45,325sqkm, and many of the outer islands are Robinson Crusoe territory, accessible only to private yachts.

WHOM WILL IT APPEAL TO? Though you'll find plenty of wallet-busting exclusive island resorts accessed by private seaplane and boat transfers, it's actually surprisingly easy to visit the Seychelles on a modest budget:

especially if you can stick to the main islands of Mahé, Praslin and La Digue. These three are easily explored as an independent traveller – with regular scheduled ferries, decent paved roads and readily available car hire.

WHAT EXPERIENCES WILL I HAVE? For an antidote to idle days on the beach, take a guided hike beneath the thick jungle canopy of the Morne Seychellois National Park on Mahé. Alternatively, explore the mini wilderness of the Vallée de Mai on Praslin in search of the famous coco de mer – a, ahem, rather erotically-shaped coconut that was famous for getting 18th-century seafarers delirious with excitement – it only grows in the Seychelles.

WHERE'S THE BEST BEACH? La Digue has the best beaches in the Seychelles –

prominent among them is the quarter-mile-long Grand Anse.

WHEN SHOULD I GO? April to May and October to November are the best times to visit, during the changeovers between the wet and dry seasons.

HOW TO GET THERE? Air Seychelles, Emirates, Ethiopian Airlines, Jet Airways and Etihad Airways fly to Mahé Airport from Mumbai and New Delhi (*return fares from ₹ 33,430*).

WHERE TO STAY? Chalets d'Anse Forban has 15 chalets set among sweeping lawns on Mahé (www.forbans.com; *from ₹ 9,275/night, minimum three nights' stay required*).

MORE INFO Lonely Planet's *Mauritius, Réunion & Seychelles* has more details on the archipelago. →



Grand Anse beach is set on the quieter side of the island of La Digue



Women in the Comoros can often be seen wearing sandalwood paste as a type of beauty mask



Comoros: for the intrepid

WHAT ARE THE ISLANDS LIKE? Few people can point to the nation of Comoros on a map – fewer still make the journey to these three weensy islands, set off Africa in the Mozambique Channel. Therein lies the appeal – in Comoros, seaside entertainment means chatting with locals and sipping spiced tea, watching fishing boats bobbing on the swells.

WHOM WILL IT APPEAL TO? Adventurers: the infrastructure is simple, alcohol is forbidden and the mix of cultures passed down by the descendents of Arab traders, Malay immigrants and African peoples makes Comoros a fascinating destination.

WHAT EXPERIENCES WILL I HAVE?

Grande Comore Island is home to the capital, Moroni: wander through the *medina* to see lively markets and local men sweeping

past in billowing white robes. Anjouan's beaches make it the most rewarding island for idle exploration.

WHERE'S THE BEST BEACH?

Try Nioumachoua Beach on Mohéli – from its shores, whales and dolphins can be seen splashing about.

WHEN SHOULD I GO? The weather is driest between May and October.

HOW TO GET THERE? Kenya Airways, Air France and Ethiopian Airlines fly to Comoros airport from Mumbai and New Delhi (*return fares from ₹ 85,340*).

WHERE TO STAY? Laka Lodge in Mohéli has simple bungalows with private terraces and direct access to a pretty beach (www.lakalodge.com; from ₹ 4,500).

MORE INFO Visit www.lonelyplanet.com/comoros for more information.

Mauritius: for food and culture

WHAT'S THE ISLAND LIKE? Mark Twain famously wrote that “heaven was copied after Mauritius,” and, while its shores are sublime, a heady cultural mix is what makes it truly unique. African, Chinese, French and Indian settlers have all come to this island, bringing their own traditions and ingredients (*below*) to bear on the country's distinctive cuisine.

WHOM WILL IT APPEAL TO? The island's full-board resorts are plentiful, but gastronomes would be advised to stray further afield to understand the national palate. A Mauritian culinary institution is *table d'hôte*: a nightly traditional meal eaten with hosts in smaller guesthouses. Mauritius also serves up history in the form of grand plantations – Château Labourdonnais is set in sculpted gardens at the northern edge of the island.

WHAT EXPERIENCES WILL I HAVE?

Eat your way around Grand Baie, seeking out restaurants serving dishes such as *ourite safrane* (octopus with ginger, garlic and turmeric) or simpler street food dishes, including *boulettes* (Chinese dumplings). Walk it all off with an amble around the Black River Gorges National Park – home to endangered bird species (and once a haunt of the doomed dodo).

WHERE'S THE BEST BEACH? Île aux Cerfs is a long, stunning stretch of sand whose furthest reaches tend to be free of crowds.

WHEN SHOULD I GO? Avoid cyclone season from January to March.

HOW TO GET THERE? Air India, Air Mauritius, Air France, and Emirates fly to Port Louis (*return fares from ₹ 45,000*).

WHERE TO STAY? La Maison d'Été is a brightly-decorated B&B with sea-facing rooms in Poste Lafayette (www.lamaisondete.com; from ₹ 11,475).

MORE INFO See Lonely Planet's *Mauritius, Réunion & Seychelles*.



PHOTOGRAPHS: CORBIS (COMOROS), MARK READ

Zanzibar: for spice-trading history

WHAT'S THE ISLAND LIKE? Historically the launch pad for expeditions into the African continent, Zanzibar constitutes an adventure in its own right, whether it involves exploring historic Stone Town's confluence of African and Arab cultures, to ambling along wide, white-sand beaches lapped by the Indian Ocean tides.

WHOM WILL IT APPEAL TO? Zanzibar has a split personality: on one side, historians will be contented by relics of the island's spice-trading past and swashbuckling yarns about explorers, including Dr David Livingstone. On the other side, much of the island's east coast is given over

to all-inclusive resorts, with infinity pools and thatched villas galore.

WHAT SORT OF EXPERIENCES WILL I HAVE? Stone Town is the starting point for getting to grips with Zanzibar's past: wander among elaborate Moorish doorways, creaking shuttered windows and whitewashed alleyways that recall the days when Omani sultans ruled over the island. To get a tiny sense of Zanzibar's maritime past, board a creaking *dhow* on a cruise from the harbour and watch the trade winds ruffling the sails.

WHERE'S THE BEST BEACH? Pongwe is a sheltered, palm-dotted cove that dodges

the seaweed blighting much of the east coast.

WHEN SHOULD I GO? Rains arrive from March to May and November to December; be aware that some lodges close in April.

HOW TO GET THERE? Kenya Airways, Oman Air, Ethiopian Airlines and Qatar Airways fly to Zanzibar from Mumbai and New Delhi (*return fares from ₹ 31,400*).

WHERE TO STAY? Kisiwa House has 11 traditional, spacious rooms arranged around a historic building in Stone Town (www.kisiwahouse.com; from ₹ 14,800 with breakfast).

MORE INFO For more on Zanzibar, see Lonely Planet's *Tanzania* guide. →



A *dhow* sweeps along the shore in Stone Town, with the spires of the town's 19th-century Catholic cathedral beyond



Madagascar: for nature

WHAT'S THE ISLAND LIKE? Visiting can be a challenge: independent travel is expensive and the rainy season can shut off whole tracts of the island. The rewards, however, are ample: the biggest island in the Indian Ocean is also one of the wildest – with landscapes spanning lush rainforests, stony deserts, cool highlands and coral reefs.

WHOM WILL IT APPEAL TO? Madagascar is a zoologist's paradise – one in 20 of all animal and plant species on Earth are found here, and nowhere else. Avenues of baobab trees and colourful chameleons are part of the picture, but the headline act is surely the lemurs – a family of primates that come in all shapes and sizes.

WHAT EXPERIENCES WILL I HAVE?

Searching for lemurs is Madagascar's greatest adventure – wander through the misty forests of the Andasibe-Mantadia National Park to find the indri, a species

whose siren-like wail rings from the treetops. Brave souls drive along the bumpy RN5 road to Mananara to seek out the aye-aye – a bizarre-looking, nocturnal lemur who taps on trees to find grubs.

WHERE'S THE BEST BEACH? Some of Madagascar's most unspoilt beaches are found on Île aux Nattes.

WHEN SHOULD I GO? October is especially lovely, with blooming jacaranda trees and flowering orchids. High season runs from July to October.

HOW TO GET THERE? Kenya Airways, Etihad Airways, Air Seychelles, South African Airways, Ethiopian Airlines, Air India and Air Mauritius fly to Antanarivo airport from Mumbai and New Delhi (*return fares from ₹ 60,600*).

WHERE TO STAY? Camp Catta is a remote complex of bungalows – choose between 'comfort' and 'rustic' – set between forests and craggy cliffs in central Madagascar (www.campcatta.com; from ₹ 3,180).

MORE INFO See Lonely Planet's *Madagascar* guide for further details. 

One of the largest lemur species in Madagascar, the indri is on the brink of extinction

3 DAYS BECOME A WEEK. A WEEK BECOMES A MONTH.



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Limitless Emojination

There's a saying in Japan: "*Me no naka ni iretemo itaku nai*". It means "it won't hurt to put him in my eye." People say it when a kid is so *kawai* (cute) that it wouldn't hurt to even put him in their eye. I guess that goes for all of Japan. There's something so cute and cuddly about the country, (in an extremely bizarre way), you wouldn't mind putting it in your eye

WORDS SHARMEEN HUSSAIN | PHOTOGRAPHS HASHIM BADANI





The morning prayer ceremonies at the *shukubo* in Koyasan are a sombre affair, the rhythmic chanting by the monks setting the tone for the proceedings



The Naruto whirlpools churn up the water menacingly, creating great swirls that seem like they want to suck you in

INDULGE ME A LITTLE.

I think I might have just made the biggest discovery of my otherwise not-so-path-breaking life. It all dawned on me yesterday, as I sat reading messages on my phone and chomping away on my chocolate-coated Pocky Sticks (a delicious Japanese snack item).

Here goes: have you ever taken a really close look at those *emoji* on WhatsApp? And I don't mean the regular grinning smiley faces or the tongue stick-outy ones. I mean the really obscure ones that no one actually uses. Where did they come from and what do they mean? I have the answer. They're Japanese! And some of them are so deliciously weird, you'll wonder why a whole pictogram was dedicated to them. Now, you might not think this is a huge discovery, but, for someone who has just returned from the strange country that is Japan, it's a revelation. Take this one for example: 🍣 It's *nigiri*. And I ate some that looked exactly like that. And then this: 🍷 These are Japanese dolls of the Emperor and Empress that are put out during Hinamatsuri, a festival that's celebrated in honour of little girls. It's also called Girl's Day or Doll's Day. This one ♨️ is the symbol for *onsen* (hot spring) or public baths that require you to be nudie. Then, there's my favourite one: 🌀 That's a *Narutomaki*, a snack made from processed fish, usually served with steaming *ramen* (noodles). The pink spiral in the centre resembles the whirlpools that form in the Naruto Strait between Awaji Island and Shikoku, the smallest of Japan's four main islands. That's how the snack got its name. Pretty darned fantastic, huh?

MY GUIDE TO JAPANESE EMOJI

Love hotel: Japanese urban homes are cramped and crowded, and the average couple has difficulty being intimate at home. Love hotels allow for couples to have a space for themselves where they can be intimate, spend time with one another, and, as our guide tells us, "make babies."



Now, if you've seen the whirlpools in person, seeing one on a fish snack, which has consequently been made into a tiny picture that sits quietly in my phone every day, is a big achievement. It's like seeing, in person, the same lighthouse and trees in the Andamans that appear on the ₹ 20 note.

I'll stop with the *emojis* now. As long as you've got the point. The point being that I am a great discoverer, and that Japan is a wonderful country with proverbial surprises in every sticky rice ball.

While we're on the topic, let me tell you a little more about the Naruto Whirlpools, **Naruto no Uzu**, or the Vortex, as some like to call them. The opposing tides of the Seto Inland Sea and the Kii Channel, between Naruto in the Tokushima Prefecture and Awaji Island in the Hyogo Prefecture, form swirling vortices, some as wide as 20 metres in diameter. It looks a bit like someone's pulled the plug out of a great big bathtub, and, gliding by in our boat, I fly into a bit of a panic because I'm convinced we're going to be sucked in. If you think you might harbour such fears as well, you can look safely down upon the action through the glass floors at **Uzu-no-Michi** (Whirlpool Road), the promenade under Ohnaruto Bridge. →

MAKE IT HAPPEN

Naruto Kanko Kisen: 00-81-88-687-0101; Kameura-kankoko, Naruto-koen, Naruto-shi; 9am – 4.20pm, every 40 minutes; 30-minute ride: ₹ 1,000 adult, ₹ 500 child
Uzu-no-Michi: 00-81-88-683-6262; www.uzunomichi.jp/english; Naruto-park, Naruto-cho, Naruto City; 9am – 6pm Mar – Sept, 9am – 5pm Oct – Feb, closed second Monday in Mar, Jun, Sept, Dec; ₹ 510 adult, ₹ 225 child



AWA

In the small town of Aizumi in Awa, Tokushima, things are a little blue. I crinkle my nose as we head into the small dyeing room of the **Ai-no-yakata**, an indigo dyeing house where the smell of ammonia fills the air. Dating back to the early Heian Era in 794 AD, the Awa region near the fertile plains of the Yoshino River has been a hotbed of indigo-growing activity. Awa indigo, or *ai*, is touted to be among the finest in the world, and, at the **Aizumicho Historical Museum** here, you can dunk white hankies into a boiling, smelly concoction of indigo and other substances to dye your very own. The main building was built in 1808, and is now a sort of museum, complete with grey *kawara* roof tiles made from local clay. If you like, you can also pop into the newer display room with its dioramas that show the ancient method of indigo cultivation, processing and dyeing (00-81-88-692-6317; 172, Aza Maezunishi, Aizumi Town; 9am – 5pm, Tues closed; ₹ 165 adult, ₹ 110 child, handkerchief dyeing experience: ₹ 275).

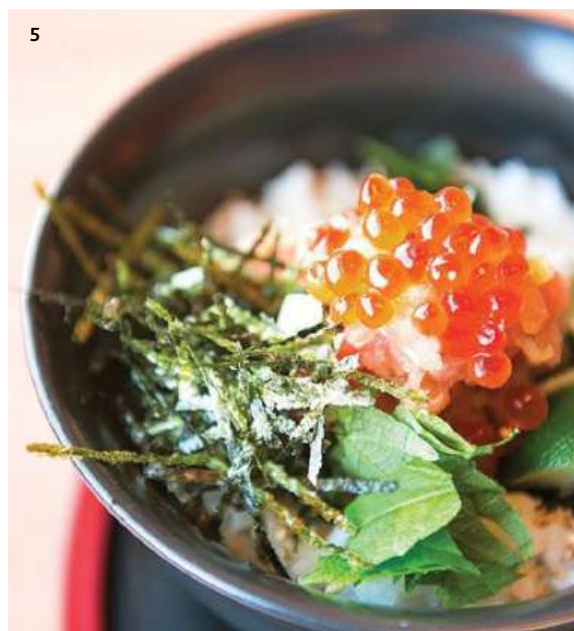


1 & 3. Orderly, dignified, organised – Osaka City is just like its people

2. It is believed that Kukai lives on in a state of eternal meditation, and meals are carried to him twice a day

4. A walk along Dotonburi Canal gives you a glimpse into the everyday lives of Osaka's denizens – office-goers, youngsters and well-dressed city-slickers spill out for a drink and a bite

5. *Taimaru meshi*, a special at Taimaru restaurant in Naruto, is like a party in your mouth – salmon roe fights for top spot with rice, raw egg yolk, wasabi and *nori*





MY GUIDE TO JAPANESE EMOJI

Izakaya lantern:
These lanterns are used to identify an establishment that sells alcoholic beverages.



WAKAYAMA PREFECTURE

Koyasan

I'll be honest with you. Vegetarian food makes me groan. Vegetables, to me, are like the days between Sunday and Saturday – they don't matter. But, as I sat on my knees on the *tatami* mats of the **Henjoko-in shukubo** (temple lodging), I was forced to eat my words. Laid out before me was a 12-course meal of the most delectable vegetarian food I had ever eaten in my life. Tiny bowls with servings of silky *gomadofu* (sesame tofu), *miso* soup, crunchy *tempura*-fried vegetables, translucent potato *sashimi*, sweet beans, *umeboshi* (Japanese salt plums) and tender baby bamboo along with a host of other things sat steaming on three different trays. Each bowl had a distinct shape and design, and each dish was so artfully served, it would've made Gordon Ramsay proud. I am mighty glad that the kindly monks of the temple town of Koya decided to throw their doors open to outsiders.

High in the mountains of Koyasan, the little town of **Koya** is perpetuating a sect of the Buddhist religion that the monk Kukai brought to the country in 806 AD. Kukai, or Kobo Daishi as he was posthumously known, wished to set up his centre away from worldly distractions, and chose the eight mountains of Koyasan as his spot, the eight peaks symbolising the eight petals of the lotus flower, a recurrent symbol in Buddhism. The town is most peaceful in the winter, and the sight of the frozen puddles, and the snow on the rooftops, is a delight. Though the town has extremely modern amenities, it's easy to believe that it's been suspended in time. The buildings look like they've been around since the beginning of time, and no one seems to be in a colossal hurry to get anywhere. Temples dot the roads, and there are now about 117 in the town that grew around the Dai Garan, or great meeting place. About 52 of these provide lodging to pilgrims and visitors. These *shukubo*, as they are called, give you a peek into the lives of the monks and are probably the best thing about Koyasan. Don't let the simplicity of the monks fool you, though. Most *shukubo* have heaters, TVs, those high-tech bum-washing toilets that Japan →





The Okunoin in Koyasan is one of the prettiest cemeteries you're ever likely to come across

SHOGUN

Shoguns were Japanese military commanders. Although appointed by the emperor, *shoguns* were actually the de facto rulers of the country, sometimes wielding more power than the imperial court. The *shoguns* first appeared in Japan in 1192 in a region named Kamakura under Minamoto no Yoritomo, the first-ever *shogun*. Yoritomo seized control over the imperial court and gained an upper hand over the aristocracy, establishing a feudal system in which the private military, the samurai, gained considerable power while the emperors of the country and the aristocracy retained their powers only in name. Yoritomo earned himself the title of Sei-i Taishōgun and the political system he developed became known as a shogunate.



The Konpon Daito's eye-catching vermilion colour sets it apart from the other temples in Koyasan, and, if you must visit just one, let it be this one

is known for, and, believe it or not, wi-fi. If you're lucky, yours will even have a *senjo* (slightly different from an *onsen*), a public bath where you can strip down to your birthday suit (other bathers be damned) and have a nice long soak in piping-hot water. You'll also be given a *yukata* to roam about in, an airy robe that will have you practising your samurai moves on the futon in your room because you look the part. Guests are allowed to join the morning prayer ceremony and must partake of the *Shojin Ryori* or Buddhist vegetarian cuisine. This is the food of the monks and is based on the principle of five cooking methods, five flavours and five colours (more like the five rules of deliciousness, if you ask me). No meat is eaten here – it is believed that the Buddha once fell sick upon eating pork and mushrooms, so, ever since, devotees refuse to eat anything with legs or eyeballs.

You must follow the rules of the *shukubo*, removing the slippers you're given to wear outside your room, using special bathroom slippers for the loo, stripping down to nothing in the *onsen* (nope, not even your *chaddis* can stay), refraining from going outside at night because bad spirits are said to wander the streets, and generally observing a manner of obeisance.

The tiny town is home to the mother lode of Shingon temples, and almost all of them have been burnt down at some point of time. Each structure holds a special significance for devotees. **Kongobuji** is the head temple, and, at one point, the entire area of Koyasan was known as Kongobuji. **Okunoin** is a cemetery with a quarter of a million gravestones,

MY GUIDE TO JAPANESE EMOJI

Cherry Blossom: *Sakura*, or cherry blossoms, begin to appear on trees in spring and are synonymous with Japan. *Hanami* is the tradition of 'flower viewing' where people make a picnic of their outing to enjoy the *sakura* blossoms.



and a sacred area lined with cedar trees, some more than 800 years old. As you walk along the path, look out for little Buddha statues wearing bibs. These are statues of Jizo, who is believed to protect children in the afterlife, and the bibs have been placed there by those who have lost children. Inside a larger complex, known as **Dai Garan**, you will find the Kondo, or main hall, where most religious ceremonies are held. It has been destroyed by fire several times and rebuilt. The **Konpon Daito**, a brilliant vermilion *pagoda*, houses a three-dimensional *mandala* (a metaphysical map of the cosmos). **Fudo-do**, built in 1198, is the oldest surviving building in Koyasan and is a designated national treasure. It's the only one to have not been burnt down.

Around the 10th century, people began to believe that Kukai hadn't actually died, but had entered a state of eternal meditation in 835 AD. He is said to still be present in the **Kobo Daishi Gobyō**, or mausoleum, where meals are taken to him twice a day.

Koyasan can be reached by road or by the Nankai Electric Railway, which stops at **Gokurakubashi**. The train whizzes silently past little towns, where persimmon trees flower in people's backyards and perfectly-pruned white pine trees stand around with cute little clumps of foliage. *Kawara*-tiled rooftops sit clustered together and the autumn colours of the ginkgo trees add splashes of colour to the landscape. The cable car that will take you to Koyasan is a bizarre diagonal compartment that shudders its way up the side of the mountain in five minutes.

Getting to Koyasan is part of the experience. →



JAPAN'S MASCOTS: YURU-KYARA

The Japanese have a fetish for cutesy things, and mascots. They're so crazy about them that they have mascots for everything from airports to individual buildings. Every prefecture has a mascot, cities within prefectures have

mascots, monuments within the cities have mascots. Here are a few!

Haba-tan the Phoenix (Hyogo Prefecture):

Hyogo adopted the phoenix as its mascot after the country was struck by (and then proverbially rose from the ashes of) the Great Hanshin Earthquake in 1995.

Koya-kun (Koyasan):

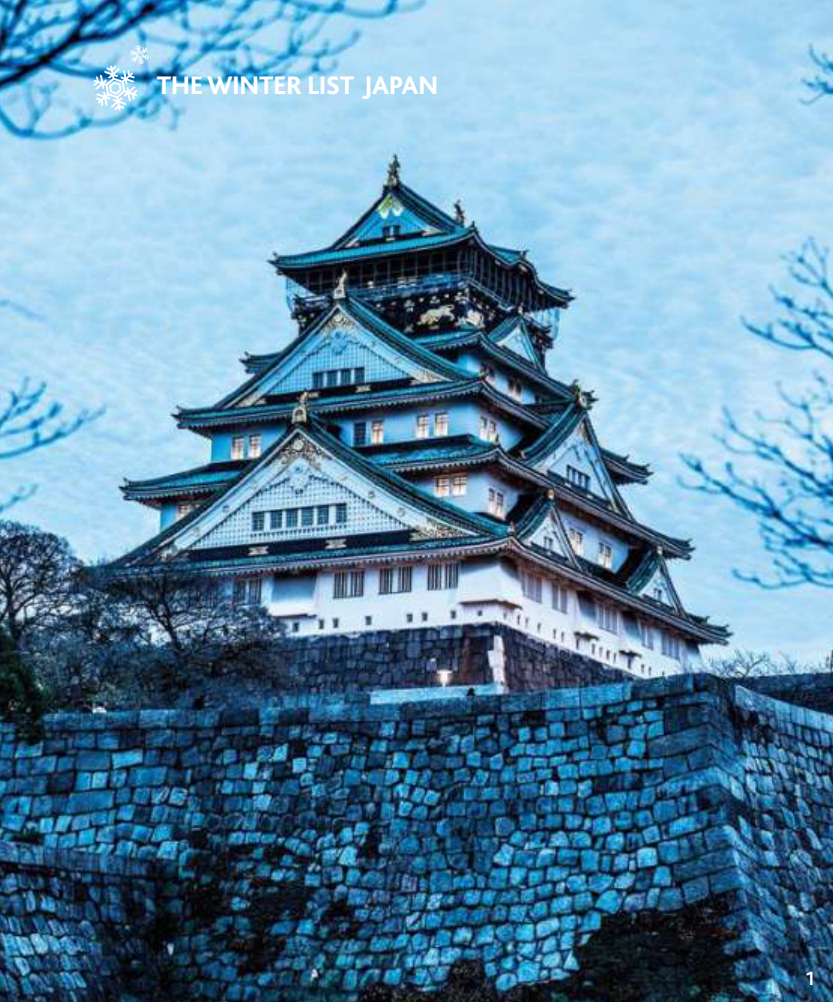
Koya-kun is a cartoon monk in an orange sedge-hat. No explanation required. **Osaka Bob** (Osaka Government Tourism Bureau): Osaka Bob is a foreign exchange student who gives people an outsider's perspective on Osaka.

Abenobear (Abeno Harukas Skyscraper, Osaka): a cuddly blue bear who lives in the clouds, likes to relax and snack on his favourite treats: clouds. The clouds on his tummy change according to the weather outside. Abeno Harukas is Japan's tallest building (300m). Head here for excellent views of Osaka and a glimpse of the cute bear.



1. Jizo is one of Japan's most-loved deities, often depicted as a child monk. He is said to protect women, travellers and children
2. Markers showing the way to the graves of prominent people
3. *Shojin Ryori*, Buddhist vegetarian cuisine, is so delicious you won't miss your meat for a second
4. Visitors to the temples in Koyasan must cleanse themselves with water before entering
5. Koyasan has a tranquil air about it in the winter months





1



2

OSAKA PREFECTURE

Osaka City

Buildings in Japan have the tendency to burn down. A lot. With all that wood and rice paper all over the place, that's no surprise. The **Osaka Castle** is one such example and it suffered the fiery fate more than once. Originally built as a monk's lodge, the site soon turned into a large temple... which, then, burned down. No surprises there. After this, a man named Hideyoshi Toyotomi, a feudal lord regarded as one of Japan's great unifiers, had a castle built on the site in 1583 – a castle fit for someone who would rule Japan permanently. But, then, Toyotomi died, the *shoguns* came to town, the Tokugawas took control... and the castle burned down again, during the Siege of Osaka. Reconstruction work was taken up by Hideta Tokugawa in 1620. A smart chap, he ordered all his feudal lords to give him large rocks and stone as gifts to help him rebuild the castle. Osaka Castle became a stronghold for the Tokugawa shogunate, but it was never safe from destruction, and, in 1665, the main tower was burned down after it was struck by lightning. The civil conflicts of the Meiji Restoration and WWII bombings left the castle scarred. It was rebuilt in 1931 thanks to donations from the city's citizens, and the site of and around the castle is now a Historical Sites Park with 13 ancient buildings from the Edo period. The main tower is now a museum, with artefacts from the castle's history, including a lacquered military fan used by Toyotomi himself and *do-maru* type armour, used by the lesser samurai, which, if you ask me, looks a shade uncomfortable.

MY GUIDE TO JAPANESE EMOJI

Tanabata Tree:
The Tanabata Tree is a combination of a bamboo shoot and a piece of paper with a wish written on it, put out during Tanabata, a Japanese holiday.



The city of Osaka, home of the claustrophobic capsule hotel and *takoyaki*, or octopus balls (not *those* kind), is a tamer version of the capital. Third-largest but still holding its own, Osaka boasts 24/7 eateries and a happening, if slightly drunken, nightlife. As we take a stroll down the **Dotonbori Canal**, this is evident – flashing LED signs light up the water and inebriated 'salary men' in identical black suits come stumbling out of bars. Sushi bars are packed and tiny street-side stalls sell steaming *takoyaki* and abalone. A few streets down, *pachinko* (Japanese pinball) parlours let out a low buzz. My photographer buddy Hashim and I decide to take a peek into one of them just to see what the fuss is about. The noise inside is almost deafening, as glassy-eyed *pachinko* addicts fire tiny silver balls into pinball-like machines. After standing around staring at one of the players for five minutes, we still can't figure the game out, and decide instead to waste our money on the slot machines, another Osaka obsession. Since gambling for cash isn't legal, game parlours such as these give winners coins or silver balls instead of money. These are then exchanged for 'gifts' like toasters and washing powder from a gift shop nominally close to the parlour, which can then be sold back for actual money. Way to circumvent the long arm of the law. →

MAKE IT HAPPEN

Osaka Castle Museum: 00-81-6-6941-3044; www.osaka-castle.net/english; 1-1, Osakajo, Chuoku; 9am – 5pm, closed Dec 28 – Jan 1; ₹ 330, children under 15 free



Dyed hair, outrageous make-up and flashy clothes make fleeting appearances on the streets of the city

Facing page:

1. The Osaka Castle stands out for its grand architecture, despite its simple colours. The year 2015 marks the 400th anniversary of the two huge battles that were fought in Osaka, both of which caused severe damage to the castle

2. Seafood is the star in Japanese cuisine, and fresh *sashimi* is one of the most delicious things to treat yourself to



The Osaka Aquarium
Kaiyukan is home
to many cute animals,
all of whom look
pretty happy
to be there



OSAKA FOR KIDS

Imagine you're on your broomstick, being chased by Dementors and evading whacks from the Whomping Willow. Imagine Harry and Ron egging you on as you ride behind them, dodging dragon flames. Now imagine all of that happening in Japanese. This is exactly what happens at the **Wizarding World of Harry Potter** in **Universal Studios Japan**, Osaka. But that doesn't take away from the charm one bit. The rides are still thrilling, the memorabilia is still perfect and Hogwarts and Hogsmeade are still exactly how you'd imagine them to be. While the Japanese commentary can make some of the other attractions in the park difficult to understand (Spiderman doesn't sound as convincing in Nihongo), the atmosphere makes up for it. If you've got kids in tow, this is the perfect place to take them. Who knows, maybe they'll pick up Japanese! (00-81-570-20-0606; www.usj.co.jp/e; 2-1-33, Sakurajima, Konohana-ku; check website for timings; one-day pass: ₹ 3,665 adult, ₹ 2,535 child)

While you're at it, the **Osaka Aquarium Kaiyukan** is also a pretty neat place. Kids will love the enormous tank that houses the whale shark and stingrays – I found myself pressing my nose up against the glass along with the other kids. The sea otters and sea lions are fun, and the penguins are a riot. There's even a touchy-feely interactive section where you can touch some stingrays and sharks! (00-81-6-6576-5501; www.kaiyukan.com/language/eng; 1-1-10, Kaigan-dori, Minato-ku; 10am – 8pm; ₹ 1,265 adult, ₹ 660 child)



1

1. *Kawai* seems to be the order of the day in Japan; cute figurines, dolls and mascots are in abundance everywhere

2. The *kashira* of an Awa puppet can sometimes be hideous, depicting demons or the enemy

HYOGO PREFECTURE

Awaji Island

Ordinarily, a life-sized doll with moving arms and eyeballs (good Lord, the eyeballs!) would be enough to scare the bejeepers out of me (I was taken to watch *Child's Play* when I was five). But there's something about the *ningyo* (puppets) of the Awaji puppetry tradition that's almost likeable. The puppets themselves are works of art. Weighing up to 10kg, each one requires three puppeteers, who have all had a lifetime of training. The *ningyo* have delicate features, lifelike hair and some even have moveable eyebrows and lips. The most hysterical are the *kashira* (heads) that can change their form – there's a young man who turns into a ghost and a benign grandma who turns into a demon (sounds a bit like my 85-year-old neighbour when the *doodhwala* is late). While the puppets move across the stage, the *gidayu*, narrator, recites the dialogue and plot. This *yoruri* (recitation) requires subtle changes of pitch and tempo for different characters accompanied by the tune of a *shamisen*. The tradition dates back to about 500 years ago, when one Dokumbo performed the art in honour of Ebisu, one of the seven deities of good fortune in Shintoism, for a good fishing season. When Dokumbo died, there were a string of fishing disasters, which led his apprentice Hyakudayu to carve a life-like doll of his teacher and perform with the puppet doll to appease the god. He went around the country with his puppet and finally landed on Awaji Island, where he died. Ever since then, the art of puppetry has held great significance there. At the **Awaji Ningyo Joruri Hall**, the last puppet theatre on the island, you can watch a puppet show and take pictures with some of them after.

On Awaji Island, within the confines of a concrete structure, you will find a temple under a lotus pond.

MY GUIDE TO JAPANESE EMOJI

Mount Fuji: Mount Fuji, or Fujisan, is a Japanese icon.



As bizarre as this sounds, it actually exists. The **Water Temple**, or **Honpukuji**, is a strangely industrial-looking building, a design of the famous self-taught architect Tadao Ando. It has a high concrete wall that blocks out the outside world from the 'paradise within'. The 'paradise within' is in the form of a concrete pond filled with lotus flowers arranged in symmetrical rows, with a steep staircase running through the middle and under it into the Shingon Buddhist temple beneath. Downstairs, the air in the room is heavy with incense, and a statue of Amida Nyorai, the Buddha who is said to look after his believers' health, looks down at a couple of pilgrims bent at the knee. Sitting there in the silence, it is comforting to know that this was one of the few structures to survive the massive earthquake that hit the country in 1995.

There's no denying that Japan's got its quirks. You could spend hours on the internet reading 'fun facts' on the country that would boggle your mind. The culture, while extremely refined and dignified, is also partly twisted, and this you can see even in its people. On the one hand, there is the obsession with all things *kawai* (cute) and with weird fetishes, but, on the other, you have austere monks and polite citizens who bow to you out of respect even while riding a bicycle. It's not easy to understand or digest, but who says you have to? Take it one bite at a time, and I promise you, you will fall tragically in love. 10

2



MAKE IT HAPPEN

Awaji Ningyo Joruri Hall: 00-81-79-952-0260;

1528-1, Fukurakou, Minami, Awaji City; 9am – 5pm, Wed closed; ₹ 830 adult, ₹ 555 child

Honpukuji: 00-81-79-974-3624; Awaji City, Higashihura; 9am – 5pm daily except religious festivals; ₹ 220 adult, ₹ 110 child

Essentials

CLICK ON THE LINKS TO FIND OUT MORE!

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Winter (Dec–Feb) can get cold, but not uncomfortably so. Koyasan is great in the winter. Awa Odori, the region's dance festival, takes place in Tokushima in August. Visit in spring for cherry blossom-viewing (late-Mar–Apr), and in autumn (Sept–Nov) for the fall spectrum.

GETTING THERE

Malaysia Airlines, Japan Airlines, All Nippon Airways and others fly to Osaka's airport from Mumbai and New Delhi (return fares from ₹36,500). From Namba (Osaka), take the Nankai Electric Railway to Koyasan (<http://nankaikoya.jp>; ₹680 base fare). Book ahead.

Take a bus from Osaka to Sumoto on Awaji Island (www.jinto.go.jp/eng; from ₹1,000 one-way). You can also take a bus from Osaka airport to Tokushima (₹2,260/one-way).

GETTING AROUND

Make use of the efficient public transport in Osaka. If you plan to spend more than a day here, get a Kansai Thru Pass, valid for travel on the subway, the New Tram, most train lines and buses. You can purchase this pass from Osaka's Kansai or Itami airports (www.surutto.com; from ₹2,200/2-day pass).

Tokushima is easy to navigate on foot, but there is also the free **GuruGuru Bus**, which operates on weekends and holidays and takes visitors to the main sightseeing spots (departure from Awa Odori Kaikan, 2–20, Shinmachi-bashi; leaves hourly from 10am–3pm). Getting around on Awaji Island can be a bit tricky as there is no local train service. Your best bet would be to take a taxi (from ₹350). The Hyogo Tourism Association can help (www.hyogo-tourism.jp).

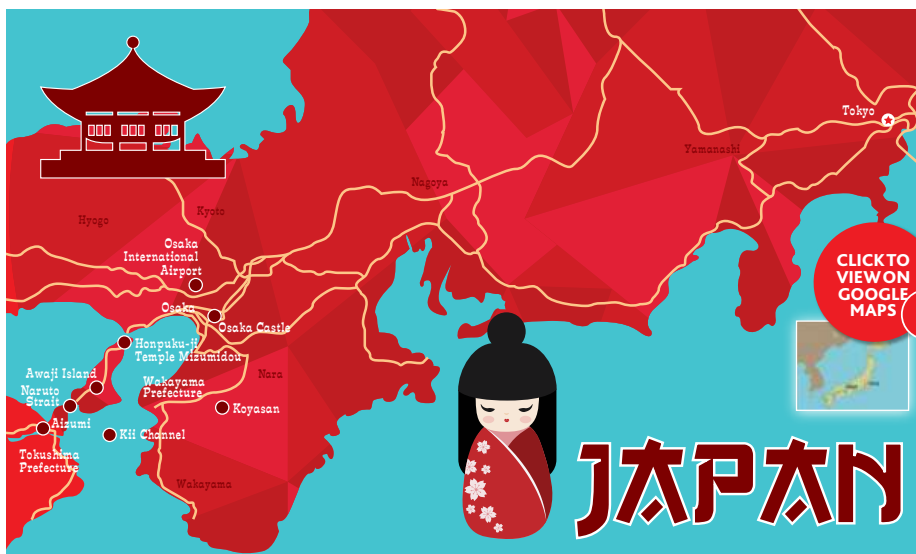
Koyasan is best explored by bicycle. Rent one from the Koyasan Shukubo Association central office (₹220/hr; ₹30 for each additional 30 min).

VISA



Indian visitors to Japan are required to have a valid visa, which takes about one working day to process (www.in.emb-japan.go.jp; single-entry visa: ₹1,670).

EMBASSY ALERT

Embassy of India, Tokyo: <http://indembassy-tokyo.gov.in>



CLICK TO VIEW ON GOOGLE MAPS

Tokushima	Awaji Island	Koyasan	Osaka
 STAY Basic yet clean and well-located, Awa Kanko Hotel is a short walk away from most sites in Tokushima. The rooms are a bit compact, but the location makes up for that. There is a 7-Eleven nearby as well (00-81-88-622-5161; www.awakan.jp [website in Japanese]; 3-16-3, Ichiban-cho, Tokushima-shi; from ₹ 8,500).	For a slice of good ol' five-star comfort, you can't beat The Westin Awaji Island Resort and Conference Center . A short walk from the beach, the hotel is comfortable with spacious rooms and an array of top-class facilities. It also has a moving floral memorial to the victims of the Great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995 that devastated the country (00-81-799-74-1111; www.starwoodhotels.com ; 2, Yumebutai, Awaji, Hyogo; from ₹ 9,200).	A visit to Koyasan is incomplete without a stay at a <i>shukubo</i> , temples that provide lodging. Henjoko-in allows guests to not only stay there but also partake of traditional vegetarian meals. You can also join in the morning prayer service and bathe in the <i>onsen</i> (the rooms don't have attached baths). Book through the Koyasan Shukubo Association (00-81-73-656-2616; http://eng.shukubo.net ; 600, Koyasan, Koyacho Itogun; from ₹ 5,350 with dinner and breakfast).	If you're looking to be bang in the centre of the action in Osaka, Hotel Nikko Osaka is your best bet. The landmark of Osaka's central area, Minami, it is situated on the busy Midusuji Avenue, known for its premium shopping outlets. The ginkgo tree-lined avenue is beautiful in the fall. Close by is the Dotonbori Canal, which comes alive at night. The rooms are neat and comfy (00-81-6-6244-1111; www.hno.co.jp ; 1-3-3, Nishi-Shinsaibashi, Chuo-ku; from ₹ 25,000).
 EAT For an authentic Japanese meal, visit Taimaru in Naruto City. It's known for Taimaru Meshi, red snapper with green onion, rice, salmon roe, egg yolk, ginger and <i>sudachi ku</i> , a Japanese lime (00-81-88-687-0077; nr Otsuka Museum of Art; 11.30am–3pm, 5pm–8pm; Taimaru Meshi Special set lunch: ₹ 1,260). Head to the Dotonbori Canal area in Osaka for great street food. Look for <i>takoyaki</i> , loosely translated as octopus balls. You'll find these ball-shaped snacks at stalls along the road (from around ₹ 220/six). <i>Kushikatsu</i> – batter-fried snacks – is another Osaka food trend. <i>Kushikatsu</i> joints have a buffet-style setup of raw produce that you fry at your table. We ate at Kushia Monogatari (00-81-66-649-1226; www.kushi-ya.com ; 6th flr, Namba Parks shopping complex, Carnival Mall; 11am–11pm; ₹ 825/ 90 min).		Fancy a curry? For Indian food in a land of flavours so unfamiliar, Bombay Kitchen in Osaka doesn't disappoint. Try the <i>thali</i> with <i>naan</i> (00-81-6-6245-9495; 1st floor, Cosmo Bldg, 1-17-1 Higashi, Shinsaibashi; 11am–3pm, 5pm–11pm; thali: ₹ 1,000). Veg out In Osaka, visit Le Coccole for vegetarian and vegan fare. The menu includes interesting Japanese-fusion dishes like <i>hijiki</i> (sea greens) <i>samosas</i> , shiitake mushroom cutlets, pizza, risotto and more (00-81-6-62-455-556; Mamenawa, 3-4-1 Kita-kyuhoji-machi; 11.30am–10pm Wed–Sat, till 6pm Sun, mains from ₹ 550).	
Good to Know Language can be a bit of a problem in Japan, as English is not very widely spoken. Make an attempt to learn a few phrases in Japanese that will break the ice, after which you can sign your way around. If you have diet restrictions, it's a good idea to walk around with a chart of animal/ vegetable pictures so you can point to what you would like in a restaurant. Most restaurants offer vegetarian options. Learn the phrases "Watashi wa bejitarian desu," which means "I'm vegetarian," or "Watashi wa niku toh sakana wo taberarimasen," which means "I don't eat meat or fish." Another attraction on Awaji Island is the Kiseki No Hoshi Botanical Museum , part of the larger Awaji Yumebutai landscape, which also includes the Plants Museum of Miracle Planet and the Awaji National Park . The museum houses plants from around the world, including a number of rare species (00-81-799-74-1200; www.kisekinohoshi.jp ; Awaji Yumebutai, Yumebutai 4, Awaji-shi, Hyogo; 10am–6pm; ₹ 330 adult, child free).			



The Bhutia village of Lachen surrounded by the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas



Spirits of the *Mountains*

Divine food that warms your body and soul,
dramatic celebrations, and a landscape transformed –
Sikkim takes on a wholly new character under a blanket of snow

WORDS KRUTTIKA NADIG | PHOTOGRAPHS VINOBA NATHAN



1



2

“PUSH!”

I pile onto the jeep, but it's no good. We're stuck in the ice, and the tyres won't budge, instead chafing and roaring in agony on the quiet mountain road. A couple of army *jawans* smirk impishly as their sturdy 4WD Indian Army jeep passes us and rolls on with success. I'm a few kilometres away from **Thangu**, a little town at 13,000ft in the extreme north of Sikkim. My fabric-covered sneakers are bravely plunged into calf-deep snow and there's no way I'm going to reach my destination – but it's hard to feel dejected.

It's hard to feel anything except total awe on this frosty precipice hugging the Himalayas; in a land of spiritual peace, in a state where these mountains are your constant friends as you travel from the urban east to the fertile west and on to the rugged north.

I'll make more friends here. Hot water bottles and electric heaters are going to be my best buddies on this wintry trip, so are the thick, woollen, dragon-motifed carpets that warm up every hotel room I check into. Cloves procured from local grocers will be my stomach's saviour on the winding, giddy, nausea-inducing roads.

I'll notice things on these long road journeys. How trucks and taxi-vans flaunt placards supporting European football clubs because football is a Big Deal here. How Buddhist prayer flags are always, unfailingly strung across rivers and valleys, as it's said the wind carries prayers to heaven.



3

1. Tasty chicken *momos* can be found at every roadside *dhaba*

2. Gangtok's MG Road is a clean, pedestrian-only zone with several shops and eateries

3. A Sikkimese woman wearing interesting jewellery

'It's hard to feel anything except total awe on this frosty precipice hugging the Himalayas, in a land of spiritual peace...'

How young women supervise roadside resto-bars and run for their lipstick when asked for a photo. And how the hills start out a fresh green with rice terraces and waterfalls before becoming giant poster boys of chocolate and vanilla ice cream.

GANGTOK is popular for a reason. It's the perfect introduction to Sikkim. It's an in-between place, a bridge between the “exotic” Northeast and the rest of India, distinct in look and feel, yet worldly and *desi* enough to be familiar. Travellers escaping the plains flock to its monasteries, its high-altitude lakes and its great restaurants. Despite a booming tourism business, it has pockets of sedate charm; a short detour from the city centre takes you onto steep inner roads lined with shady trees and Colonial bungalows.

I'm taking an afternoon stroll on the pleasantly vehicle-free promenade of **MG Road** (new market) and the chaotic **Lal Bazaar** (old market) nearby. Lal Bazaar cascades down broad stone steps all the way to an enclosed vegetable bazaar, its vendors calling out from both *pucca* stores and literal hole-in-the-wall shops. They peddle cute Chinese teacups, *momo* makers, hard yak cheeses, floppy mountain mushrooms... my friend Jyothy decides to have a plate of *puchka*, but I'm saving my appetite for the real goods.

The Sikkimese set meal at **9'ine** is an absolute knockout. I gorge on *gundruk ko jhol* (fermented vegetable soup), *kinema* (surprisingly tasty fermented soybeans) and *maachoo* (crumbled buttery cottage cheese), while Jyothy stuffs herself →



1. Gangtok has steep streets sprawling across the hills
2. A massive bell engraved with holy text fascinates all who visit Tashiding Monastery
3. Young monks in training at the large ground of Pemayangtse Monastery where the annual Losar celebrations take place
4. A farmer makes himself a basket to carry vegetables and other produce on one's back
5. The entrance to Lachen's small monastery





1



2

with pork curry, assuring me between mouthfuls that it's quite divine. It helps that all of this is served in wooden bowls and Bhutanese china and the owner is ready with a smile and an anecdote – of how a group of Japanese tourists who went bananas over the *kinema* tried to take some beans home, only to have them stink up the suitcase and be seized by customs.

The revered **Do Drul Chorten stupa** and **Namgyal Institute of Tibetology** are an antidote to this self-indulgence. Sonorous chanting greets me even before I reach the prayer hall where Buddhist monks are conducting a special *puja*, with young disciples reading out *mantras* from parchment kept on *choktse* (low tables) and blowing the *kangling*, or human thigh-bone trumpet – yes, you read right!

Outside, a steaming brown liquid swirls enticingly in a huge cauldron. Monks pour the boiling tea into innumerable kettles to serve attendees, while nuns patiently light rows of oil lamps. Devotees are circumambulating the *stupa* without pause, turning the prayer wheels and murmuring *Om mani padme hum* (the universal *mantra* of Tibetan Buddhism) – they must go around 108 times according to their scriptures.

Enchey Monastery doesn't have a *puja* on and is much quieter – so quiet, in fact, that we unexpectedly spot a Himalayan palm civet prancing about a bamboo thicket. This is just a happy preview of the Himalayan animals I will come across. I have my first yak ride at **Tsomgo (Changu)**

Lake the next morning, en route to **Baba Mandir**, a shrine to a Sikh soldier, in the first snowy landscape I see in Sikkim.

The yak safari is funny and bumpy and reminds me of the time I rode a camel. We wobble around under a clear sky and I feel like quite the camera-poser, mounted on a bejewelled yak with a perfectly reflective blue lake in the background. The herder is goading me to upgrade to the 'Kanchenjunga safari', in which this poor creature will apparently carry me up an almost 45° slope (by my wild estimate) to an otherwise inaccessible view point. I tell him I'm worried the yak may collapse and send me tumbling down, but he tells me not to worry, and, on this friendly bartering note, we part.

THE twin northern villages of **Lachung** and **Lachen** must have looked like a couple of Swiss hamlets before the earthquake in 2011, when their timber walls and tiled roofs hadn't been wrecked and bolstered with so much metal and concrete. But they're still lovely to behold from the surrounding snow-tinged woods.

Village walks draw you into the local life. A small glowing doorway attracts my curiosity at Lachung. Family members lounging on cosy piles of blankets beckon me towards a sooty-ceilinged kitchen; I squeeze myself in and find *sisnoo ko jhol* (nettle soup) bubbling over the fire. My attempt to reach for a bundle of this →

IMMORTAL SOLDIER

The sepoy-saint Baba Harbhajan Singh, who died young in the 1960s, is worshipped as the guardian spirit of these mountains by army personnel stationed here. The story goes that he appeared to a fellow soldier in a dream and asked for a memorial to be built for him, which became a proper shrine with temple bells, incense and visitors in search of divine intervention. Some claim to have seen the Baba's ghost patrolling the Indo-China border on a horse, and rumour has it that his belongings are sent home to Punjab and brought back every year – on a reserved train berth, with an army escort.



1. *Chhang*, or millet beer, is the local poison, served in bamboo glasses that never seem to go empty

2. Children cradling puppies at Tashiding Monastery

3. Senior monks at Rumtek Monastery hanging out with furry friends





Tsomgo Lake
freezes in winter
and looks brilliant
when the clouds
part to reveal
clear blue skies



unknown vegetable is thwarted by three voices shouting at me to keep my hands off. I'm told the thorny leaves cause rashes. Penjo, my guide, is still brandishing the bunch of nettle at me as a warning when his fingers begin to redden and itch.

Our hotel boy in Lachen takes me on his own version of a village walk, which is far more hands-on than the usual and has me clambering breathlessly up and down his 'shortcuts'. This ends at **Ingredient**, which is obviously the most happening place in Lachen, what with the psychedelic paintings of Bob Marley and Kurt Cobain and silhouettes of random curvy ladies. It also has hookah, which you'd have to be really daring to smoke if you plan to keep walking and travelling at this altitude.

Lachen is a starting point for the 15-day **Green Lake Trek**, popular with hardcore trekking enthusiasts. For an occasional trekker like me, the pine-forested hills above the village are as good a place to climb to as any. Our hotel manager speaks nonchalantly of Himalayan bears, blue sheep, tahr goats and red pandas, but my eyes are peeled in vain; I'd have to trek further and deeper to catch a glimpse of the wildlife that once prowled near the villages. It's my cue to get out of civilisation and enter wild Sikkim.

I find **Shingba Rhododendron Sanctuary** bereft of its famed blossoms, waiting for spring with eerily bowed branches, like a girl in a salon waiting to flip her newly-dyed hair. But up ahead, **Yumthang Valley**

is one of those lucky chameleon-esque spots that adapt beautifully to the seasons. Its ephemeral summer flowers have gone and left behind a fleecy meadow streaked by water of the purest, palest blue.

My daydreams of a colourful spring are abruptly broken at **Yumesamdong** (Zero Point) at which gangs of tourists are having an Alpine picnic and young couples are trying to pose romantically amid clunky snowmen, encouraged and supplied with goodies by a vendor selling everything from peanuts to liquor in paper cups. It's a merry scene that even Honey Singh's *Blue eyes* blaring from another jeep can't spoil. I can't repeat this enough: there's nothing as satisfying in the freezing Himalayas as a bowl of steaming noodles.

Gurudongmar Lake is the highest point to visit in Sikkim. My excursion to this holy lake (which begins at 4am because each day is a race against the fast-moving, view-obscuring clouds) flops severely when our jeep gives up near Thangu. Hot tip: You can forget about seeing Gurudongmar's frozen winter face unless you've got a 4WD vehicle.

But winter can also play nice, as I discover in the form of sparkling waterfalls frozen mid-stream along the road to Gurudongmar. The vision of icy stalactites and soaring peaks is enough to provoke old chestnuts about journeys-being-better-than-destinations, and completely redeems the day. North Sikkim is a masterpiece in monochrome. →



spy **Tashiding Monastery** from a distance. It sits atop a jade mountain behind tall trees. West Sikkim is the opposite of the north; it rolls out vista after vista of terraced farms and makes me understand why Sikkim's Tibetan name is *Denjong* – 'valley of rice.' Legend has it that Guru Padmasambhava, the Second Buddha, (more on him later) shot an arrow to choose a site for the monastery and it fell here. A courtyard full of *stupas* called *Thong-wa Rang-dol* is believed to cleanse your sins by its mere sight. Penjo tells me this in the same breath as "many Russians come here," which I'm not sure what to make of.

Yuksom is a stone's throw away. The village caters to transiting (and mostly foreign) trekkers going on the real Kanchenjunga Base Camp Trek with a handful of basic eateries and a dozen shops hawking backpacks, cheap shoes and imported chocolates and energy bars. I grab a Mars bar and set off towards **Norbugang Coronation Throne** where Sikkim's first Chogyal (king) was crowned by three wise lamas in 1642. A gently rising path takes me past plantations of spinach and cardamom, chicken coops and wild Himalayan cherry trees (pink-flowering *prunus cerasoides*) to the ancient stone seat resting under an even older fir tree.

The trek to **Dubdi Monastery** is longer and steeper (45 minutes, with several rest huts along the way), and a face-saving option if you want to brag about trekking in the Himalayas without going *anywhere* near the intimidating summits. I walk on the newer stone path but keep throwing glances at the parallel dirt track, telling

'It's Guru Drakmar himself, the destroyer of evil, twirling and swaying along white lines drawn on the ground to guide him'

myself this must be the track on which Lama Lhatsun Chenpo trudged up in the 17th century when he established Yuksom as the first capital.

Walking on the dirt track is predictably more fun; helped along by reliable roots, Jyothy, Penjo and I share a chuckle at the ASI signboards that sweetly implore us to keep moving as the destination isn't far away.

MY first thought on seeing Sikkimese monasteries and their vivid universe of deities is, "Wait, how is *this* Buddhism?"

It's a natural question if your idea of Buddhism is a serene Gautam Buddha who has renounced worldly rituals. To do a quick history recap, Siddhartha Gautam Buddha lived and attained enlightenment around the 5th century BCE. His teachings were passed down centuries and across borders in various shapes and sects, but Buddhism eventually declined in India. Meanwhile, the king of Tibet invited a tantric sage called Padmasambhava

to subdue demonic forces in his kingdom in the 8th century AD.

Padmasambhava is credited with bringing Tantric Buddhism (*Vajrayana*) to Tibet. It merged with indigenous faiths to form a creed rich in mythology, deities and rituals that spread into Sikkim. That's why the angry-looking Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) is called the Second Buddha, founder of Tibetan Buddhism, while Siddhartha Gautama is called the Historical, or Shakyamuni, Buddha here.

For a traveller, the upside in all this is that Sikkimese monasteries have superb wall art and sculpture featuring all these gods and demons. They also have some extraordinary festivals. I'm at **Pemayangtse Monastery** in **Pelling** for the three-day Guru Drakmar *chham*, or masked dance festival, leading up to Losar, the Tibetan New Year. Warlike music from drums and cymbals sets the stage for a classic mock-fight of good versus evil.

Monks wearing fierce masks – think bloodshot tigers, eagles and stags – dance in front of the *gompa* on the first two days. They build up to a stunning climax, strongly resembling Dussehra. I'm lodged in a crowd of onlookers by the *gompa* entrance when a gigantic masked dancer emerges from within. It's Guru Drakmar himself, the destroyer of evil, a heavily-dressed basket frame carried by a monk who can only see his own feet, twirling and swaying along white lines drawn on the ground to guide him.

This spectre ushers in a procession of red-hatted monks taking "evil" effigies into the woods to be burned. Their clanging turns louder, their chanting more urgent as the head monk shoots arrows at the →



1. Steaming *sisnoo*, or nettle soup, with raw nettle on the side

2. A monk awaits his cue to beat the prayer drum at Lachen's monastery

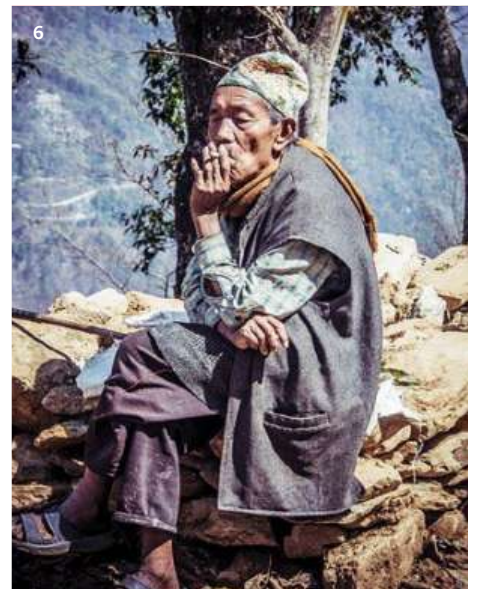
3. Tourists on a yak safari at Tsomgo Lake

4. A pretty window painted with mythological motifs at Biksthang Heritage Farmhouse

5. Warm-toned interiors make you feel cosy in the cottages at Biksthang

6. Smoking is banned in Sikkim, but some old men live by their own rules

Facing page: The pristine and fast-flowing Teesta River is popular for rafting and fishing





effigies, setting off a war cry of whistles and ululation. I see Ravana burning in city *maidans* in the flames that swallow these effigies. The ashes are buried in a hole in front of the *gompa* by the Red Hats, who then perform a ring dance of their own.

The highlight of Day Three is the display of a massive 300-year-old *thangka* (religious scroll), which is kept rolled up inside the monastery all year, but this plan is axed by looming rain clouds that threaten to harm the delicate silk. We have to content ourselves with an improvised display of Lama Lhatsun Chenpo's 300-year-old garments. Penjo seems quite moved by it, as are many of the devotees whose cues I follow, bowing before the relics and accepting blessings from senior monks.

What a spectacle! I can't imagine there being anything more to see in Pelling, but I'm wrong. The **Rabdentse Ruins** lie on a flattened hilltop looking like a tiny Machu Picchu shielded by mist. Another gently sloping path paved with gleaming mica takes me into this ancient palace complex, the second capital of Sikkim (1670 – 1814).

It's older than the monastery, but a far quieter witness to the times, beautifully desolate on its perch away from the scene of action. Its fragmented walls face the crisp white Kanchenjunga range filling Pelling's horizon, only 40km away as the crow flies. Pelling loses half its soul on a cloudy day.

I don't know anything about **Biksthang** before I get there. I suspect our resort is the only attraction in the village and so it is; widely-spaced cottages on a 20-acre estate of paddy fields, orange orchards, pear and pear blossoms,



1. The traditional houses and silver fir forests of Lachen wearing their magical winter cloak

2. The friendly and super-cute kids of Yuksum

'The Rabdentse Ruins lie on a flattened hilltop looking like a tiny Machu Picchu shielded by mist... a far quieter witness to the times'

fruiting walnut trees and flowering magnolias. A bowl of farm-fresh grapefruit greets me in the outdoor *machaan*-like luncheon area, followed by a bark and a caper from Bolt, the resident St Bernard. This definitely feels like home.

Jyothy and I instantly hit it off with the sweet and slightly flustered resort owner Deyang, who moved here with her husband Gyurmey Namgyal aka Popo to take up her dad's suggestion that she do something constructive with the family land. **Biksthang Heritage Farmhouse** is all about the homely service and chatty hosts who shepherd us to the nearby **Lheuntse Monastery** and then join us for a round of *chhang* (millet beer). Biksthang claims to grow the best millet in the state, so this experience shouldn't be missed if you can help it.

I'm unabashedly sold on the property by the time I leave. A tool shed converted into an outdoor bar, improv decor using wild yellow fungi, stone masonry paired with wood panelling. All sourced from a sustainably managed estate, these little flourishes justify coming to Biksthang just for the retreat. And, of course, for the uninterrupted view of the Kanchenjunga, which rivals that of Pelling.

Later, when I ask Popo how he passes time in these parts, he describes how natives like him enjoy catch-and-release angling at the Teesta and Rangit river confluence. 'Catch and release' is an apt epithet for Sikkim, which lets you absorb a heady incense of natural and manmade harmony, allowing you to leave no footprints and taking away nothing but the token gift of a *khada* (scarf). And yet feel rewarded.



Make it Happen: Sikkim

Essentials

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Sikkim is great in both snowy winter and rhododendron-filled spring. Though the weather can get very chilly, October to December is when the mountains look their best and the high roads aren't yet blocked by frost.

GETTING THERE

All major Indian airlines (SpiceJet, Air India, Jet Airways, Vistara, Go Air and IndiGo) fly direct from New Delhi and Kolkata to Bagdogra Airport, the closest airport to Gangtok (125km) (return fares from ₹7,800).

We drove down to Gangtok (3 hrs) with Clubside Tours & Travels. An agent is also useful to help arrange permits and provide guides (00-91-33-22647053; www.clubside.in; from ₹3,500/ day for AC Scorpio; private guide from ₹1,200/ day).

GETTING AROUND

Gangtok and the mountain villages we visited are all compact and fun to explore on foot – there are some uphill stretches so one needs to be in reasonably good shape. We drove from one place to another with Clubside (see above).

PERMITS

Indians do not require an Inner Line Permit to enter Sikkim, but permits are needed to visit Tsomgo Lake and north Sikkim. Your local tour agency will arrange these easily (apply 24 hours in advance, carry ID proof and six passport-sized photos).

FESTIVALS

Festivals are celebrated at various monasteries through the year with masked dances, traditional music and chanting. Since the dates are decided as per the Buddhist lunar calendar, it's a good idea to call the tour agency ahead and check what's on.

WHAT TO PACK

Carry thermal layers and a warm jacket, sports shoes or flat-heeled boots, any personal medications, and books or entertainment to pass the evenings, as they'll largely be spent indoors. Speak to your doctor about altitude-sickness meds.

ITINERARY

Because of capricious weather and traffic on the narrow mountain roads, it's recommended to start your days early in the Northeast. 7am is great, 10am is late!

Day 1 Arrive at Bagdogra/ New Jalpaiguri and proceed to Gangtok in your pre-booked tour vehicle. Check into the **Hidden Forest Retreat** and relax while enjoying the staff's homely hospitality and a view of the city lights by night (00-91-3592-205197; <http://hiddenforestretreat.org>; below District Court, Middle Sichy Busty; from ₹3,400 with breakfast).

Day 2 Submit your ID for the permits and go on a guided tour of Gangtok. The tour includes places like **Do Drul Chorten Stupa** (sunrise–sunset; free), **Namgyal Institute of Tibetology** (10am–4pm; ₹10) and **Enchey Monastery** (8am–4pm, closed Sun; free). Spend the evening checking out the shops on **MG Road** and at **Lal Bazaar**, then drop into **9'INE Native Cuisine** for an authentic Sikkimese dinner (00-91-3592-205061; New Market, look for a 1st floor signboard on MG Rd; 11am–9pm; set meal from ₹230).

Day 3 Depart on a day-trip to **Tsomgo Lake** (40km; very high altitude) after a breakfast of eggs, pancakes and *parathas* at the resort. Take a **yak safari** around the lake (₹300) and drive further to **Baba Mandir**. Return to the city by afternoon.

Day 4 Check out and depart for **Lachung** (103km). Have lunch at a *dhaba* en-route and arrive at **Yarlam Resort** in the afternoon (00-91-3592-281663; www.yarlamresort.com; in the centre of the village; from ₹10,000 with all meals). Spend some time exploring Lachung with a guided village walk and head back to the hotel for an Indian dinner.

Day 5 Head out towards the snow-carpeted meadows of **Yumthang Valley** after breakfast (transport surcharge: ₹3,000/ vehicle for Zero Point, no surcharge for Yumthang). Drive through **Shingba Rhododendron Sanctuary** and take a *chai* and noodles break at **Zero Point** (from ₹20). In the



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VIEW ON
GOOGLE
MAPS

evening, transfer to **Lachen** (45km) and check into the cosy **Apple Orchard**, where apples are plucked in September (00-91-9474837640; <http://theappleorchardresort.com>; on the upper side of the village; from ₹9,600 with all meals). Have another filling Indian dinner and go to bed early.

Day 6 Rise before dawn and set out with a packed breakfast towards the high-altitude **Gurudongmar Lake** (66km; transport surcharge: ₹3,500/ vehicle; low oxygen environment, walking slowly is advised). Spend the day gazing at astonishing alpine scenery and return to Lachen before sunset. Try typical Sikkimese food like *momos*, yak cheese, nettle soup and wild spinach *saag* at Apple Orchard.

Day 7 Return to **Gangtok** (107km) after breakfasting on a *khuri*, or crêpe with potato, paneer and butter. Have lunch at a *dhaba* enroute and check into **Hotel Elgin Nor-Khill** – a former royal guesthouse – on arrival (reservations: 00-91-33-40646300, property: 00-91-3592-205637; www.elginhotels.com; Paljor Stadium Rd; from ₹10,100 with breakfast and one meal). Spend the evening relaxing in the hotel, or head to **Bakers Café** for coffee

(00-91-3592-220195; MG Rd; 8am–8.30pm; beverages from ₹60). Gangtok is safe after sunset if you have company.

Day 8 Proceed to **Yuksum** (120km) in West Sikkim after breakfast. Halt at **Tashiding Monastery** and walk uphill for 10 minutes to see the Buddhist shrines and *stupas*. Check into **Yuksum Residency**, which largely caters to passing trekkers (00-91-3595-241277; www.yuksumresidency.com; behind the village bazaar; from ₹4,050 with breakfast). Have lunch at the hotel and later walk up to the **Coronation Throne of Yuksum** and back (trail starts from the bazaar, 20 min one-way, easy gradient).

Day 9 Check out and go for a trek to the nearby **Dubdi Monastery** (60 min one-way, moderate gradient, drive to starting point). Then drive on to **Pelling** (40km), stopping enroute at the **Kanchenjunga Falls** and **Khecheopalri** wishing lake. Check into the luxurious

Chumbi Mountain Retreat (00-91-3595-258241; www.thechumbimountainretreat.com; Naku Chumbong; from ₹10,500 with breakfast). The hotel has three restaurants: try the Sikkimese banquet with *chhang* at **Dyengkhang** (₹1,500/ person, book in advance).



Day 10 Take guided tours of the **Pemayangtse Monastery** and the **Rabdentse Ruins** (sunrise–sunset) after a lavish continental breakfast. Have a simple lunch at one of the food stalls outside the monastery (*momos*/ *thukpa* under ₹100), then check out and drive on to the romantic **Biksthang Heritage Farmhouse** (00-91-8770015329; www.biksthang.com; near Chuchen, Takuthang; from ₹7,950 with all meals; there are no other dining options nearby).

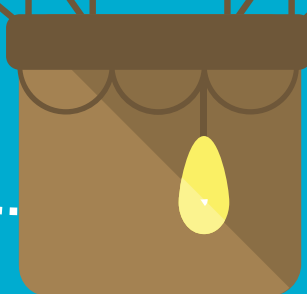
Day 11 Stroll around the estate and have lunch on a *macha* with your hosts. Spend the evening hiking up to **Lhuentse Monastery** (30 min one-way, moderate gradient, drive to starting point) or just relaxing by the poolside bar.

Day 12 Depart for Bagdogra (114km)/ New Jalpaiguri (110km) and return home.



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Mini Guides



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Food & Drink in Normandy, France



MINI GUIDE OCTOBER 2015

Coastal Mauritius

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MINI GUIDE OCTOBER 2015

Food & Drink in Normandy, France

Sights such as the Bayeux Tapestry, D-Day beaches, Monet's garden in Giverny, and Mont St-Michel are Normandy's historic draws, but its abundant seafood, cheeses and cider are the best way to fill gaps between sightseeing

WHY GO?

For cuisine that is distinctly à la normande

WHAT IS THERE TO DO?

Whether it's trying out some *coquilles St-Jacques* (scallops) or *tripes à la mode de Caen* (tripe and vegetables slow cooked in cider), Normandy has a slew of traditional dishes. If you're more of a cheese person, try the region's Camembert, Livarot and Pont L'Évêque. End with Normandy's AOC cider, which is made with a blend of apple varieties and is fruity, tangy and bitter.



Left: Mont St-Michel poised between land and sea

Right: Regional cheeses include Camembert, Pont L'Évêque and Livarot

On the go

POISSONNERIE 1

Trouville has long been famous for its fishing port, and its newly-restored covered fish market is the place to head to for the local catch – there are stalls selling mussels, sole, mackerel, scallops and, of course, oysters. Enjoy a waterfront picnic of oysters with lemon (around ₹1,000 a dozen) and a glass of chilled white wine (corner Bd Fernand Moureaux and Rue des Bains; 10am – 6pm).



Trouville's fishing port has drawn numerous painters and writers

FROMAGERIE DU VIEUX MARCHÉ 2

Just a few yards off Rouen's old market square (the market hall itself is a newer building), this shop run by expert *fromager* Léon Déant specialises in Normandy cheeses such as heart-shaped Neufchâtel, a soft creamy cheese (00-33-2-35-71-11-00; 18, Rue Rollon; 9am – 12.45pm and 3pm – 7.30pm Tues – Fri, 9am – 12.45pm Sat, closed Sun afternoon and Mon; small Neufchâtel ₹500). The nearby market is open every morning except on Mondays.

A LA REINE MATHILDE 3

Located in Bayeux just north of the cathedral (and named after William the Conqueror's queen), this is a patisserie and tea salon designed in the sumptuous style of the 1900s, with a wide array of sweet confections on offer. There's seating here, so, if you have the time, it's a great spot for a croissant or *pain au chocolat* for breakfast, or for macaroons with afternoon tea (00-33-2-31-92-00-59; 47, Rue St-Martin; 9am – 7.30pm Tues – Sun, closed Mon; cakes from ₹300).

Bistros

LA RÉGENCE 4

An old-time Cherbourg bistro, La Régence is housed in a hotel of the same name, right on the harbour. It serves traditional fish, seafood and meat mains, and specialties include mussels, home-made smoked salmon with basil-flavoured espuma, and sirloin steak with mashed potatoes and Pont-l'Évêque cheese sauce (00-33-2-33-43-05-16; www.laregence.com; 42, Quai de Caligny; mains from ₹700).



La Régence makes a great first stop after the ferry to Cherbourg

LE BOUCHON DU VAUGUEUX 5

It's well worth reserving ahead for this buzzing restaurant in Caen, which serves modern Norman cooking. It's a locals' place, so there's no translation of the chalk-board menu, which might include pork cheek and snail cassoulet, and duck à l'orange (00-33-2-31-44-26-26; www.bouchonduvaugueux.com; 12, Rue Graindorge; closed Sun and Mon; three-course lunch menu from ₹1,550/ person).

LA PETITE AUBERGE 6

This traditional French restaurant is possibly Le Havre's most charming dining option. There are good-value weekday and lunch menus, and ingredients are seasonal. Try the duck *foie gras* with fig marmalade, and cod cooked Dieppe-style, with cream, white wine, mussels, shrimps and mushrooms (00-33-2-35-46-27-32; www.lapetiteauberge-lehavre.fr; 32, Rue de Sainte-Adresse; check website for timings; three-course lunch menu: ₹2,000).

TURN OVER FOR MAP AND NUMBER LOCATIONS

MINI GUIDE

Food & Drink in Normandy, France

Getting around



Essentials

GETTING THERE

Fly direct to Paris Charles De Gaulle airport on Air India and Jet Airways from Mumbai and New Delhi (return fares from ₹51,000). Take a train from Paris St Lazare to Rouen; the journey takes just over an hour (<http://en.voyages-sncf.com/en>; return tickets from ₹2,100).

THE COST



DIFFICULTY OF TRAVEL



WHEN TO GO

June to September is the best time to visit Normandy. D-Day commemorations are held on the landing beaches in June, while Fêtes Médiévales in Bayeux, held in July, celebrates the city's glorious history. Deauville's American Film Festival takes place in September.

Gastronomy

GILL 7

Gill in Rouen has French cuisine of the highest order, served in an ultramodern dining room on the banks of the Seine. Specialties include Breton lobster with fennel ravioli and lobster bisque, and there's also a seven-course tasting menu at ₹ 6,875 (00-33-2-35-71-16-14; www.gill.fr; 8-9, Quai de la Bourse, Rouen; closed Sun and Mon, plus holidays in Apr and Aug; mains from ₹2,250).

L'ABSINTHE 8

Facing the Vieux Port in Honfleur, this restaurant serves classy French cuisine made with seasonal produce. Specialties include sole meunière, roasted pigeon and blue Breton lobster. Reserve ahead for Saturday dinner and Sunday lunch (00-33-2-31-89-39-00; www.absinthe.fr; 10, Quai de la Quarantaine; three-course menus from ₹2,400).

LES VAPEURS 9

A home away from home for Parisian weekenders and even for the odd movie star during the



Gilles Tournadre has won two Michelin stars for his menu at Gill

Deauville American Film Festival, Les Vapeurs has locally inspired seafood dishes served up in a style befitting its Art Deco surrounds. Unusually for France, the menu offers à la carte dishes only (00-33-2-31-88-15-24; www.lesvapeurs.fr; 160-162, Quai Fernand Moureaux; mains from ₹1,000).

Visa

Apply for a short stay Schengen visa through VFS (www.vfs-france.co.in). It costs ₹ 4,255 and takes around two working days to process.

Sleep

To enter the 13th-century **Ferme de la Rançonnière 10** is to be transported to another era. Half-timbered rooms in this fortified farm are elegantly furnished, and the restaurant is excellent too (00-33-2-31-22-21-73; www.ranconniere.fr; ranconniere@wanadoo.fr; Route de Creully - Arromanches, Crépon; from ₹5,600).

La Maison de Lucie 11 in Honfleur is decorated with antiques and contemporary objets d'art. Some bedrooms have Moroccan-tile bathrooms, and the shady terrace is ideal for a summer breakfast (00-33-2-31-14-40-40; www.lamaisondelucie.com; 44, Rue des Capucins; from ₹11,900).

Hôtel de Bourgtheroulde 12 is a former private mansion in Rouen that's been converted into a luxury hotel. The rooms are large and beautifully designed, and the lobby's glass floor overlooks a pool (00-33-2-35 14 50 50; hotelsparouen.com; info@hotelsparouen.com; 15, Place de la Pucelle; from ₹15,000).



La Maison de Lucie was the home of an early 20th-century novelist

Fancy a curry?

Le Taj Mahal serves Indian and Pakistani cuisine. Go for the buffet if you don't want to opt for the à la carte menu (00-33-2-35-41-36-93, Rue Jean de la Fontaine, Quartier Saint François, Le Havre; 12pm-2pm, 7pm-11pm; buffet from ₹600).

Embassy Alert

Embassy of India, Paris: www.ambinde.fr

For more details, log on to lonelyplanet.com

COMPILED BY NATALIE MILLMAN. WITH INPUTS FROM PETER DRAGICEVICH, TOM MASTERS, ALISHA WADIA AND FRIYAN DRIVER. PHOTOGRAPHS: JUSTIN FOUKES, ICONOTIC/ALAMY, LES LADURRY/ALAMY. CURRENCY AT THE TIME OF GOING TO PRINT: €1 = ₹74



MINI GUIDE OCTOBER 2015

Coastal Mauritius

Cerulean waters and pearly-white beaches might have made it a hit with honeymooners, but Mauritius is much more than just a stop-and-go destination. Explore an island that is varied in both landscape and culture

WHY GO?

For all the delights the coasts have to offer

WHAT IS THERE TO DO?

Mauritius is not just about the beaches. Of course, there are plenty of sandy shores to sip your piña colada on if you choose to do so, but the island is also loaded with interesting flora and fauna, can't-stop-gorging-on food and an abundance of activities to keep you busy.

Left: The beaches of Île aux Cerfs are among the best in Mauritius

Right: Indo-Mauritians make up the largest chunk (68 per cent) of Mauritius's population. They are descended from Indian labourers brought to the island to work the sugarcane fields



The natural world

ILE AUX AIGRETTES 1

A popular ecotourism destination, this nature reserve is on an island just offshore. Not only does it preserve rare remnants of the coastal forests of Mauritius, it also shelters unique wildlife, such as Aldabra giant tortoises and endangered pink pigeons. Several tours leave daily from the mainland. Book in advance (www.mauritian-wildlife.org; check timings and prices online).



The boomerang triggerfish is one of Mauritius's reef inhabitants

FLIC EN FLAC 2

With water all around, diving seems like the most natural thing to do. Some of the island's best dive sites are located just beyond the village of Flic en Flac. The best-known site is **La Cathédrale**. Nearby, you will also find the **Rempart Serpent**, which attracts scorpion fish, moray eels and lionfish. Reputed local operators Sun Divers offer dives every day (00-230-403-39-00; www.sundiversmauritius.com; Hôtel La Pirogue, Wolmar; check website for timings and dive schedule; ₹3,200/ dive including gear).

TAMARIN BEACH 3

This sandy beach was once mainly a gathering spot for surfers, but is now visited daily by happy bottlenose and spinner dolphins. While a lot of operators offer the chance to travel out by boat and swim with the friendly beasts, make sure you choose a sustainable operator. JP Henry Charters offers highly-recommended 1.5-hour dolphin trips on either speedboat or catamaran (00-230-729-09-01; www.blackriver-mauritius.com; Bois Des Billes Ave, Royal Rd, Black River, swimming with the dolphins tour: ₹3,450/ person).

Food

PORT LOUIS 4

The capital of Mauritius, Port Louis can get overwhelming with its bustle and noise, but its alleyways are home to some of the island's best food. The Central Market is full of stalls selling street fare such as *gâteaux piments* (chilli cakes) and *dhal puri* (thin pancakes served with spicy sauce), while a portion of honey-glazed pork can be had for around ₹ 60 in Chinatown (Central Market timings: 5.30am – 5.30pm Mon – Sat, to 11.30pm Sun).

LES LATANIERES BLEUS 5

Tables d'hôtes – privately-hosted meals at guesthouses – offer an insight into the cuisine and life of the locals. At Les Lataniers Bleus, the communal evening meal takes place on the verandah, where charming host Josette Marchal-Vexlard dishes out excellent seafood and fine conversation. Call on the morning of your visit (www.leslataniersbleus.com; Black River; Mon – Fri; three-course meal with aperitif: ₹1,500).



Prawns flavoured with wasabi from the Fish and Rhum Shack

FISH AND RHUM SHACK 6

This beachside barbecue, held one or two evenings a week at the luxurious Shanti Maurice resort, is an experience you must not miss. Island fish, game and meat are grilled on request and served with salads and herbs picked from the hotel's garden, alongside local beer and cocktails made with Mauritian rum (00-230-603-7200; www.shantimaurence.com; Rivière des Galets Chemin Grenier, St Félix; 7pm – 10.30pm; dinner from ₹6,000 excluding drinks).

TURN OVER FOR MAP AND NUMBER LOCATIONS

MINI GUIDE

Coastal Mauritius

Getting around

See Eat & drink Sleep



Essentials

GETTING THERE

Emirates, Air Mauritius, Air France and Air India fly to Mauritius from Mumbai and New Delhi (return fares from ₹44,300).

THE COST



DIFFICULTY OF TRAVEL



WHEN TO GO

Although temperatures are fairly moderate throughout the year with occasional rainfall, the best time to visit Mauritius is either between April and June or September and December.

Beaches

POINTE D'ESNY AND BLUE BAY 7

Pretty sandy stretches have made this area a popular spot for private villas and *chambres d'hôtes* (B&Bs). While weekends at Blue Bay beach can be crowded with locals coming down for picnics, weekdays are blissfully quiet and make for the perfect spot to lounge on. High-speed watercraft are banned at Blue Bay as it has been given marine park status to protect its coral.



Le Morne was often a refuge for escaped slaves before 1835

LE MORNE 8

The Le Morne Peninsula – shaped like a hammerhead shark – has some of the island's best beaches and is the stuff of Mauritian legend. The legend goes something like this: in the early 19th century, a group of escaped slaves – ignorant of the fact that slavery had recently been abolished – jumped to their death when they spotted soldiers making their way up the cliff. Hence the name 'Le Morne' (the mournful one).

ILE AUX CERFS 9

This good-looking offshore island

was once populated mostly by stags, imported for hunting from Java, but today it lures plenty of visitors. With 4km of sandy shore to pick from, there's more than enough room for everyone. Lots of boat operators in mainland Trou d'Eau Douce offer a water-taxi service (your hotel can book one).

Visa

Indians get a free visa for up to 60 days on arrival (www.mfa.govmu.org/).

Sleep

Pointe d'Esny has a nice selection of guesthouses, and *L'Oiseau du Paradis* 10 is the pick of the lot. Rooms are painted in a tropical palette and feature an assorted mix of traditional furniture. Guests have access to the nearby beach via the owner's private villa over the road (00-230-631-5496; www.oiseaudeparadis.com; Coastal Rd, Pointe d'Esny; from ₹4,000).

Supremely stylish but without the accompanying price tag, the *Récif Attitude* 11 gives onto a relatively undeveloped stretch of beach, and has plenty of pillow-strewn nooks for lounging away from the sand (00-230-261-0444 www.recif-hotel-mauritius.com; Royal Rd, Pointe aux Piments; from ₹8,650 with breakfast).

La Pirogue 12 is a collection of hut-villas arranged along 500m of sandy beach. The rooms open out onto a grove of palm trees, and the seaside restaurant hosts regular seafood barbecues and lobster nights (00-230-403-3900; www.lapirogue.com; info@lapirogue.mu; Flic en Flac; from ₹15,150 with breakfast).



More than 1,000 palm trees surround the huts at La Pirogue

Fancy a curry?

Tandoori Express offers a great view of the harbour and serves traditional Indian cuisine (00-230-210 9898; www.tandoori-express.restaurant.mu; Astrolab Bldg, Le Caudan Waterfront, Port Louis; 10.30am – 10.30pm Tue – Sun; mains from ₹300).

Embassy Alert

High Commission of India, Port Louis, Mauritius (www.indiahighcom-mauritius.org)

For more details, log on to lonelyplanet.com

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WIN

Win a getaway for two in Surabaya, Indonesia

WORTH
₹2 LAKH



Tigerair offers Indian travellers flights from five Indian destinations – Bangalore, Chennai, Hyderabad, Kochi and Tiruchirapalli



THE PRIZE

- Two return Economy Class tickets to Indonesia via Singapore on Tigerair
- A four-day/ three-night stay at HARRIS Hotel & Conventions Gubeng

HOW TO ENTER

To participate in this contest, fill your details into the entry form and send it to: *Lonely Planet Magazine India* (October 2015), Worldwide Media Pvt Ltd, The Times of India Building, 4th Floor, Dr DN Road, Mumbai – 400001. Competition closes at midnight on October 31, 2015. Terms and conditions apply.

COMPETITION ENTRY FORM

For a chance to win this fantastic prize, simply fill in your details and post this form to: *Lonely Planet Magazine India* (October 2015), Worldwide Media Pvt Ltd, The Times of India Building, 4th Floor, Dr DN Road, Mumbai – 400001. Competition closes on October 31, 2015. Terms and conditions apply.

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Worldwide Media Pvt. Ltd, publisher of *Lonely Planet Magazine India*, may contact you with details of its products and services or to undertake research. If you prefer not to receive such information by post or phone, please tick this box ☐. Please include your email address if you prefer to receive such information by email. We may occasionally pass your details on to carefully selected companies whose products and services we feel may be of interest to you. If you prefer not to receive such information by post or phone, please tick this box ☐.

Terms and Conditions for the lucky draw:

1. The contest is organized by Tigerair, HARRIS Hotel & Conventions Gubeng and Worldwide Media Pvt Ltd (WWM) and is binding on all participants in this contest and all applications for participants.
2. Only one entry permitted per person, entries made in bulk or by third parties are prohibited. WWM/ Tigerair/ HARRIS Hotel & Conventions Gubeng reserves the right to cancel any duplicate entries and debar all such entries from the contest at its own discretion.
3. Entries received after the closing dates shall not be entertained.
4. The results declared by WWM/ Tigerair/ HARRIS Hotel & Conventions Gubeng will be final and no further queries or complaints or questions will be entertained and WWM/ Tigerair/ Park Hotel Hong Kong are further not obliged to respond to the same.

5. There is no cash alternative and the prize is non-transferable.

6. The winner of the contest shall manage/ arrange for the travel documents including the visa, passport, transfers, etc. and ensure that they meet all foreign entry requirements and have the appropriate medical insurance.

7. WWM/ Tigerair/ HARRIS Hotel & Conventions Gubeng are not responsible for difference or variance or deficiency in the service (including the hotel stay) and will not have any obligation to respond to any of the complaints.

8. WWM/ Tigerair/ HARRIS Hotel & Conventions Gubeng reserve the right to change/ modify the terms and conditions of this offer or to withdraw this offer at any point in time if circumstances arise beyond our control.

9. The winner of the contest shall pay and be responsible for the income tax and other statutory taxes before claiming the gift coupon/voucher.

10. The winner of the contest shall give proof of payment of income tax and other statutory taxes before claiming the gift coupon/voucher.

11. Tigerair will provide air tickets – Base fare only. Applicable taxes and other charges need to be paid by the winner.

12. Air tickets are valid on Tigerair flights with airline code TR only and are not applicable on code share partners.

13. WWM/ Tigerair are not responsible for any delay that occurs for reasons outside their control.

14. Once the reservations are made and the flight ticket(s) issued, changes are permitted subject to availability and the applicable date change penalty and difference in fares are applicable.

15. The contest is open until midnight on October 31, 2015.

16. The winner will be selected on November 10, 2015. The winner will be notified via the email

address provided at the time of submission.

17. Travel must be completed by January 31, 2015. Any changes in the Tigerair flight schedules, routes and seasonality, as well as seat availability, affects the choice of departure date.

18. In case of a 'no-show', penalty would be applied as per the fare rules.

19. Flight confirmation is subject to availability at the time of booking.

20. Blackout period and other restrictions may apply.

21. The prize tickets cover travel from Tigerair gateway airports in India only. The winner will have to pay all other travel expenses and any other applicable service charges, surcharges, airport or security taxes or fees, passenger facility charges or fees, and for accommodation, gratuities, meals, and all other travel expenses.

22. WWM/ Tigerair/ HARRIS Hotel & Conventions Gubeng will not abide claims,

damages or liability of any kind, including personal injuries, death or property damages or any direct consequential, incident or other damages which the winner or anyone may suffer as a result of participation in this contest or the acceptance, use or misuse of the prize.

23. WWM/ Tigerair/ HARRIS Hotel & Conventions Gubeng are not responsible if the contest cannot be redeemed due to war, terrorism, bad weather, strikes, riots, civil disruption, system failure or an act or God or the winner.

24. Employees of WWM/ Tigerair/ HARRIS Hotel & Conventions Gubeng and their relatives and business associates are not eligible to take part in this contest.

25. The contest is open only to Indian residents aged 18+. The guest of the winner would also have to be an Indian resident aged 18+.

26. Other terms and conditions as applicable.

PRIZE DRAW

WIN

Win a getaway for two in Surabaya, Indonesia

WORTH
₹2 LAKH



Facing: Although a business-driven city, Surabaya has beautiful pockets of interest

HARRIS Hotel & Conventions Gubeng is strategically located in the centre of Surabaya's business district

OFTEN known to be a business-driven city, Surabaya has quixotic little corners of interest. Closely linked to the birth of the Indonesian nation and home to many of the nation's fiercest independence fighters, Surabaya – referred to as the City of Heroes – is filled with symbols to commemorate its history. With its Colonial buildings, modern shopping malls and high-rises, the city is a melting pot of the old and new.

Visitors keen on revisiting Surabaya's past have plenty of options to explore. Undoubtedly, the city's most popular attraction, **House of Sampoerna** – a magnificent 19th-century Dutch structure – is a museum and a shrine of the Sampoerna Empire. With its Dutch architecture, strong Chinese influences and an Arab Quarter, the **Old City** is another place of interest. The strongest testament to Surabaya's history is the **Heroes Monument**, which pays respect to all the warriors that were killed during the Battle of Surabaya. The **Sepuluh Nopember Museum**, which symbolises the struggle of the people of Surabaya, is also a must-visit.

Surabaya is home to many awe-inspiring places of worship. Located in the Arab Quarter, the **Mesjid Ampel** is the most sacred mosque in Surabaya. Another impressive modern mosque in Indonesia, **Masjid al Akbar** has a magnificent array of turquoise-tiled domes. The **Kong Co Kong Tik Cun Ong Temple** is primarily Buddhist but has a variety of Confucian and Taoist altars that will amaze visitors.

Surabaya's **Chinatown** is always buzzing and is one of the biggest in Indonesia. Around noon, it becomes a hectic street for trade and, by night, turns into a spacious outdoor eating venue. Animal lovers can visit the **Surabaya Zoo**, which is home to birds and animals, as well as marine life. The **Kayoon Park**, located along the banks of the Kayoon River, is a recreation centre at which one can explore the cuisine of East Java and indulge in a variety of water sports. To the north of the park is the **Kayoon Flower Market**, where couples can walk hand-in-hand amid beautiful flowers.

Surabaya is also known as the gateway to **Mount Bromo** and **Bali**. It is an ideal base from which to explore East Java's other attractions, such as Mount Bromo, the cool mountain retreats of **Maland** and the ethereal beauty of the **Ijen Plateau**.

Tigerair and **HARRIS Hotel & Conventions Gubeng** are offering one lucky couple the opportunity to win a four-day, three-night romantic getaway to Surabaya via Singapore, the gateway to amazing destinations in the Asia Pacific. This prize also includes return economy airfare to Surabaya on Tigerair via Singapore from any of the Tigerair destinations in India.

Tigerair, a leading no-frills carrier based in Singapore, offers affordable travel options to empower travellers to explore new destinations. Tigerair operates 41 weekly flights to Singapore from five Indian destinations – Bangalore, Chennai, Hyderabad, Kochi and Tiruchirappalli direct to Singapore. Tigerair connects to some of the most popular destinations such as Bali, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Manila, Perth and Taipei via Singapore.

With Tigerair's partner Scoot, Indian travellers can now also connect to amazing destinations in Australia and North Asia.

Tigerair's 'Tigerconnect' offers a seamless transfer facility for Indian travellers to travel beyond Singapore without having to clear immigration or retrieve baggage. Which means Indian passengers can explore two destinations in one, without any additional visa cost.

Moving on to the accommodation, **HARRIS Hotel & Conventions Gubeng** is strategically located in the centre of Surabaya's business district, within a 45-minute drive from Juanda International Airport, and a five-minute drive from Gubeng Train Station. The hotel offers 152 stylish rooms, an outdoor pool, the fun Dino Kid's Club and the indulgent H'Spa. With a spacious 650sqm ballroom, seven meeting rooms and free wi-fi throughout, it is also an ideal place for business.

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